

ANTHONY C. WEST

THE NATIVE
MOMENT

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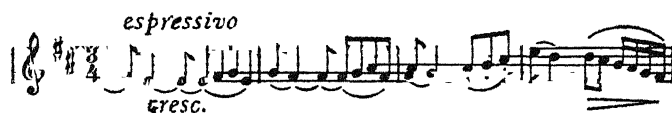
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BEETHOVEN

Forgive . . . as we forgive . . .

To my grocer

L.G.W.

The great brown harvest-hand of autumn lying on the long road, painting her colours on undone summer's green. Grey high sky and a cloud-coppered sun, a milky haze over Meath's flat fields: O Ireland is a continent, each county a compacted nation with different voice and different eye; thirty-two disunited nations in a cumulative state of disease, an old striped bedtick for a banner.

O the lakes, the lakes. I've lived far too long by water lapping in the loins of the hills: when I am dead open ye all doors and windows, pass round the strong pipes, shut up the cats, tie my big toes together, appoint an eater for my sins, throw salt unto sweet water, tell the bees I have gone and put a black band round the hives. . . .

NOON

STEADY as a tank the big truck lunges on.

'This is a bloody fox-fool chase!'

'Ha—himph.' Healy grunts somnolently.

'Godsake, don't go asleep there.'

'Nah.'

He seldom talks unless he has to. His palate is cleft, his upper lip a risus. You have to understand his idiom. He is a good fellow. His mother took one look at him and dropped him head-first on the floor. He is a child with fire-red hair. He works and saves with frightening patience—works, eats, sleeps, saves: he wants to buy a little farm. He is a fine relaxed driver and has done this run six days a week for five years and knows every hole in the road.

Simon wants to say: Healy, avic, I love the terrible gentle patience of you. Stop now for Godsake and let me out. I will walk home gladly. Instead, he says: 'Who the hell will want to buy eels in Dublin?'

'I dunno.'

Migod, to have to go through life with a small potato in the mouth: what destiny, what heritage. . . . O pity for the damaged ones, the maimed in form or mind: nice-looking guy too—good blue eyes and broad head; a score of lives to shape such a noble skull; a decent man offending no one.

'Magnus? Will ye ever marry?'

'Me? Arr-warr . . . what a man churn for whin he c'git free butter?'

'Aye, something in that, I suppose. But would ye not like a wee churn of your own, now?'

'Agh-warrrr . . . ! Yersilf?'

'Aye, someday—ass over heels like the horse said to the dame at the jump.'

'Vuya Burch? They're sayin' y'have t'ring an her?'

'Not so, Magnus.'

'She does be goin' down t'see ye in t'new car?'

'No harm in that.'

'Good farm—fine girl,' he says with some envy.

'Aye—in that order!'

'Good farm . . .' he says again, nostalgically.

Get out now and hitch back to the white lakes before I lose them and watch winter come, sleep in the short sun, live on fish, flesh and filched potatoes: a hut of sods and a bed of bracken, rabbit-skin jacket and lambskin pants, woolly side in. . . .

How is Ophion, now? Asleep, a grey dream ringed round the bottom of the can: does he know in his mouthful of water he travels so swiftly? Water his world in sublacustrine thickets and indigo silence, light broken on an opaque window; light through darkness yellowing the sun, moonlight a silver cobweb.

'Speed, Magnus, has made us all sick. I watched a seed sprouting a whole day. It moved into the grateful sun, a real an' gigantic movement an' yet, I never saw it move an' that's the sort of speed we all depend on for our existence.'

'Aye. . . .' He yawns. A living thought wearies him.

'Mechanical speed's a merry-go-round. I see no harm in a man sailing a fortnight across a good sea instead of balling the jack in a bloody aeroplane.'

'Aye. . . .'

'We're all trying to run away, Magnus.'

'Aye. . . .'

Ophion: five hundred eels for market—Simple Simon in Dublin town.

'Magnus, Ophion wants his water changed.'

'Bugger ye an' yer Ophlin.

'He'll die if he doesn't have fresh water. A dead sample's no good. There's a stream—pull up, like a good man.'

Magnus changes down carefully, braking, saying: 'Water me own eel, ha ha ha. . . .'

A busy wind tidies the haw-bloomed hedges, the hasty water in the laughing stream. Ophion wakes up to the water-

flow, ringing round its circular shell. Simon feels tempted to let it free. It would mole into the mud and wait for maybe ten years until its growth told it to seek the sea.

'Come an!'

'I like streams, Magnus—watch 'em all day. My hands in 'em, my feet. . . .'

'Come an!'

'I'm not going to peddle eels for sure. Why am I going at all . . . ? Only to find the sloughed skins of old envies an' greeds, oul wants an' ambitions. . . .'

'Wha' d'ye want t'sell eels in Duddlin for, anyways?'

'Not my idea. Devlin an' Lucey think Dublin needs eels an' elected me because I've cosmopolitan experience. We're stuck with a whole half-ton of eels an' the London prices won't pay the carriage now with all the cheap continental fish coming in for the Cockneys.'

'Awarr. . . .'

Grey leaves fall: May will foam the fields again, feather the trees, swallows forget these harvest-skies. . . . 'Magnus. What's the Corran news?'

'Hagh—not much. Oul Joe Waters' dead. He was a hundred an' two.'

'Wonderful if ye could have his history of change.'

'Hell af a wake he had. They put *poitín* in t'porter. The boys was clane mad.'

'Joe always said he'd leave enough for a good wake.'

'Aye. . . . It's right that Tamar Palmer's up t'pole.'

'What . . . what was that?'

'Aye! Oul Palmer's put her out.'

'My God—where is she now?'

'Wid the aunt at Kilshane.'

'That oul spike harrow?'

'Aye. . . . ha ha ha.'

'Who is the father?'

'She'll not say. They say oul Palmer curses all day an' prays all night for the shame she brought him. They say

he's near out of his head. He was goin' t'shoot her wid the twelvebore. He was shockin' fond of her—used t'take her everywhere he wint.'

'My God. Tamar—pretty Tamar. Wish ye hadn't told me.'

'Why?'

'Doesn't matter . . . what guy does Corran name?'

'Several wur mentioned. Mrs Palmer an' t'Rector tackled thim but they cleared themselves. There was talk the uncle had a han' in it too. The boys say that's why t'mother tried to peg somewan else.'

'Who is he?'

'He works in Dublin. I often see him at t'cafe. Maybe he's skipped. Ye must'a seen him in Corran? He was allus up on his holidays.'

'Don't remember. . . .'

Ahead the gathering smog-sky, the lorry going under the grey canopy, already the dead taste of soot in the clean air.

'Give me a fag, Magnus. Me nose is far too sensitive for this muck.'

'Tamar'd a made a lovely roide. Best lookin' girrl in Corran.'

'If ye're just goin' to fide her, why worry about the looks?'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Yeh, misery's always comical. I've only seen Tamar once since I came home—last May. She'd nothing to say to me—no wonder.'

'They niver knew till she started t'swell.'

'Stop licking your bloody jowls.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . . Up t'red lane!'

'Some people walk in light. They're usually the ones who're baited an' betrayed. The dove's not worth a damn without the serpent, my friend.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Aye, the loud laugh, the oul ha ha ha, the spit out. I'd

like to get me hands on the bastard responsible. My day was poor enough but by God, ye've spoiled it entirely.'

* 'Ha ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'To hear ye, man, ye'd think I was trying to be witty.'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha . . . comical feller, Simon!'

If he starts laughing he cannot stop on account of the way his mother dropped him, he becomes possessed by laughter as another man is possessed by rage and every time he laughs he slobbers his breath back for the same amount of time as the laugh. Laughing Boy, the wits call him, after some movie they had seen. He has a duty in life to make laughter.

Simon gives up and tries to think as the unaccustomed cigarette smoke tightens his mind. He shrinks from the sudden dis-ease that is kin to an ill-tasting jealousy. But what were the odds? Tamar was carrying a living child. It could be a good one—even the Jesus babe was highly suspect by authority. But the cruel 'A' brand-red on living flesh, never to be erased as long as she lives in Corran; women envying her, men lusting her and then smearing her to right their frustrated spite.

'Why in hell didn't they get her away to England or somewhere?'

'I dunno. . . . What are ye worryin' about it for?'

'Maybe for the same reason that I got up one wet night to let a rabbit out of a trap.'

'Arragh, she walked int' it wid her eyes open.'

'So did the rabbit. . . .'

He dozes, the nicotine making him heavy, dreaming immediately back to the lakes. Tamar is walking along a stony strand in a lard-white moon that brightens as day: a girl at foaming puberty, the tragic medieval face, the great grey eyes soaked in fear, the mouth bruised with weeping, the belly ripe to bursting. Gulls glide still-winged around her, their ivory feathers argent for the moon. Tell me, Tamar, the father? She shakes a weary head, whispering: You are the father, Simon . . . wandering on, the big eyes floating in

hopeless tears, bare feet stubbling over the moon-grey stones, the small waves dying in a dust of silver. Simon the father by proxy. Tamar! he calls and becomes conscious of the silence which is real as water or thick smoke. Tamar, marry me!

His voice reflects off the silence as light off glass, making sound images around him: Tamar, marry me! Tamar, marry me! Wait. Death like time cannot wait . . . she is walking out upon the water in the moon's silver ladder, the gulls swirling round her head. . . .

He starts up, the cigarette scorching his knuckles, remembering the dream but avoiding it, trying to talk it away.

'We're all half-spent an' half-dead soon as born, Magnus. We're graceless—only the unborn have grace. . . .'

'Aye.'

'Children are born now with old weary eyes an' fear in the set of their mouths. We are their betrayers. My God. . . .'

'Aye.'

'Magnus, ye'd say "aye" if I said the Irish Sea was buttermilk.'

'Ha, ha, ha. . . .'

'Don't start laughing again. . . . Why the bloody shame? Half of Corran's proud mothers get their firstborn the weatherside of the church door.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'We only have our mothers' word for any of us. I never wanted my father. I only wanted to be born an' some male had to get me.'

'Quare feller, Simon!'

'The getting of children is a reasonable social activity. It's not a penalty. We have to live with the cult of the dug an' the cult of the silken leg. Oul Palmer, himself, he used to pinch all the bottoms in the choir when he was singing basso profundo. Not a girl would go down the chufch lane with him on a dark night.'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'This bloody dogmatic Jehovanism will jail us all. It's

always easier for some big-mouthed Moses to prohibit than to encourage. . . .’

• ‘Aye.’

‘Always that strange thing, modesty, fastidiousness: tact. The Irish know little about it an’ the Englishman has fined it into absurdity—wears rubber gloves t’go to the toilet.’

‘Ha ha ha ha. . . .’

‘Tamar used to be clean an’ smooth as bog-cotton. She always reminded me of quartz in the rock, full of form an’ light.’

‘She was a bleddy free, man!’

‘Don’t gossip me any more. I’ll hammer it out myself. . . . How do ye know she was a parish whore? Were ye with her?’

‘No bleddy fears! Too dangerous.’

‘Ye are also a vicious bastard, Magnus. Crucifying by hearsay.’

‘No smoke widout a fire.’

‘No wonder crusaders made chastity belts. . . . Cat-calls in dustbin nights. Any Tom or Harry, faceless, featureless. Magnus? I loved that child—oh, only as a sort of symbol for a cleanly life. I’ve always had to have a symbol. When I was four I loved a schoolteacher an’ used to suffer torments in case she made a fool of herself. She got angry with a cheeky kid one day an’ boxed his ears, her face ugly. It was autumn an’ the wind had heaped dry leaves in corners. I waited outside the building with an armful of leaves an’ when she came out I pelted her. I couldn’t stop pelting her. She was scared of me an’ just stood there, covering her head an’ sobbing until the master came an’ kicked my ass. . . . Tamar was the one person in the whole world who thought the sun rose an’ set in my pants. She has walked with me through all my ragbag days. I was content with that. To know people too deeply is a danger unless ye can love ’em from all angles. Love’s a bottomless lake. No wonder people paddle in the lusty shallows.’

The city: peristaltic streets flowing past the truck, moving

people about; autumnal haze now dour city-fog, dark-seeming, sly movement, muted violence; a stranger unrecognized and were he to accost a citizen and tell such a tale of woe and total loss, playing the part so well that he would weep on his own misery and rend his coat, the citizen would listen, nod, shake his head and then pass sadly on into the eternal gloom where voices laughed. . . .

'Magnus, I'm shit scared. I am, I tell ye. I'm sweating. I see things—little grey men an' women fornicating agin the walls an' gathering at the corners wid eyes like frogs.'

'Arrrawarr wa-la wa-la. . . .'

'I'll go back with ye, Magnus. I'll crouch on the floor of the cab. . . . No, can't. I must give it a fair shot. What time will ye pull out again?'

'Bout two.'

'Twelve now . . . no, not enough time. Time can be a terrible thing for an oilless lamp. It must be torture for a hanging man to listen to the last ticks of the clock. My God, we're a subtle an' civilized people an' no mistake.'

'Arr. . . .'

'Cities are shithouses where one third of the population pulls the chain on the other two thirds. An' Magnus, cities are where the images of men meet with the same indifference as the sidewalk meets the street. I saw an owl bum lying down to die in the gutter once. He died an' the people went past him, offended by his lack of delicacy. Like praying, I suppose dying should be done in secret. . . .'

The truck stops in an alley smelling of tidal scum and soot, outside the middleman's warehouse, a big barn of a shed on a corner with green double doors, the dwelling-house next to it. Vincent I. P. Lavery, Wholesaler and Commission Merchant, in yellow Gaelic lettering. The warehouse is littered with sacks, broken crates and slimed vegetables, old potatoes sprouting in corners like big grey-haired spiders, the pallid shoots deformed legs, aborted things incested in darkness and filth. . . .

'Spuds, Magnus! A nation's poison, the false untruthful root. Grey bloated bloody monstrous things, earth apples palmed on Paddy Reilly, Esquire, by some owl shuler of an Eve. If only we could artistically see the bastards, we'd never eat 'em again.'

Healy goes to find the middleman. He does not want to unload the potatoes without seeing him. With a wonderful detached humility he obeys all instructions to the letter and would drop a load of potatoes over O'Connell Bridge if his boss said so. He loiters impatiently about the big doors, looking up and down the street and smoking a fag. Half scared to touch them, Simon progs about, collecting abnormal potatoes, grotesque cancerous demons waiting to crawl back into life. He takes skewers from a crushed crate and makes a totem, inadvertently treading on a rotten potato. It squelches and makes a bad smell. It is like walking on human excreta. Almost retching, he wipes his shoe on a sack.

'Come on, Magnus! This bloody place'll give me the jeebies!'

'Wait a minit. . . .'

Laverty's family peer round the door between home and warehouse, watching like weasels. Mrs Laverty stands inside the street door, watching.

'What are ye waiting for?' says Simon.

'Boss wants th' cheque for th' last load.'

'An' Mister Laverty knows that, so he won't appear until ye do unload.'

'Agh, buck it. . . .'

Healy gives up and backs the shuddering truck inside, making the place dark, mixing exhaust fumes with the prevailing stinks.

*O God, the usury, the living off man's necessity to eat.
O a clean hut of sods on a fresh shore, the virgin vintage of
the wind, a bracken bed for a winter's wait. . . .*

Healy looses the tethers and coils them neatly, rolling

back the grass-green tarpaulin with its black lettering: John Tandy, Wholesaler and Commission Merchant. Healy slaps the tethers on to the bonnet with the shout of an Orange drum. Healy—big boots, thin shins, old trousers. Simon smothers in a wave of inarticulate compassion for him. Not so much for Healy as for what Healy thinks he is; Healy the human, the life-man working anonymously inside his skin, thinking, dreaming some sort of dream, hoping some sort of a hope, eking out days, saving, dying slowly and slowly. . . . Here lies, anon, one Magnus Healy, a very harmless man.

He starts lifting over the sacks, lowering them down the side of the load. 'Let 'em drop. I'll catch 'em.'

It is pleasant to take the dropping sacks in his arms, pleasant to feel the running of his strength. He clears a square of floor and starts building the sacks into neat tiers, criss-crossing them. His care makes Healy impatient, muttering in his forked throat: 'Fling 'em aff! Fling buggers aff. . . .' He cannot say more since Laverty's three taggly children watch them.

Good to feel strength: he can lift a sack straight off the ground over his head without any strain; he can carry a sack under each arm and sling them up on the tiers and straighten them there. God bless the lakes—twenty miles rowing a day: fit as a fiddler at a tinker wedding. The lovely root-smell of soil, bog soil it is.

'Chuck t'friggers aff!'

'They'll damage, man!'

'Frig 'em! Frig Laverty. . . .'

'I'm not thinking about Laverty. What about the poor women who'll buy these spuds an' them all bruised black?'

'Frig 'em too ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Watch out—here comes m'am.'

'An' hur too! Chuck 'em aff. . . .'

Mrs Laverty is seven months gone. *How many months has Tamar gone. . . ?* The drawn, saint-patient look of bearing

women, the inward eye. The time for peace and slow growth, moon by moon.

• 'Is that the lot, now?' Her voice holds a weary complaint as though the potatoes were another unwelcome problem.

'Yes, ma'am. Nine tiers of eleven an' one sack. Count 'em?'

Dispiritedly, she walks slowly round the cairn, just looking, not counting, trying to pinch a potato in a corner to check the consignment's soundness. She smells of talcum powder and stale clothes, the hips made big and distorted by the child in her, thick ankles, twisted stockings, slopping slippers: a sad and flaccid female with a load of life. The children ghost after her. She waves them back when Healy stows the tarpaulin and tethers and draws out the truck. He has no more than two inches either side but handles the vehicle like a draughtsman's pen, the great truck an extension of his own body.

Simon is sweating slightly, the sweat-smell acrid and clean like the sweetness of the good earth on his hands; burlap, earth and sweat. Good man-strength—a hundred sacks and no fatigue, not even breathlessness. . . . *O keep this hard-won strength and not waste it—all I've got now; health and strength; fishing finished, autumn at my ease and when her colour-coat is shed I'll hibernate, the sun burning low to solstice-time, the winter lakes more beautiful than any woman's mouth, more honest than the second-hand sanctity of this verdigris land. My God, how fortunate I am. I've never been so footloose free. . . .*

Healy gets a signature from Mrs Laverty. The children creep closer to Simon, gazing into his face as no adult would dare, their bright eyes rivet-hard and guileful, features already haggard with sly wisdom they have not earned. Since he seems distraught they disturb him, creeping under his nails and looking down his earholes.

He wants to set his mind in order, to tidy it for the city, to complete the swift mechanical journey from the ancient lakes. It is like standing on the edge of chill water before

the plunge: seeing the lakes for so long, he keeps seeing them now, hearing them through the city sounds. Were a man, over days, to walk the way, he could accommodate the change. But Simon's eyes prickle with the stark angularity of the raw buildings. His head aches: to link here and there with consciousness, to preserve the sense of direction, to tell himself clearly and cogently why he is here: to say—ye are here, ye pore bastard, to sell eels and that is a project without any sense at all.

Tamar. . . . He cannot drive her from his mind. It must be Mrs Laverty. From one angle, all gravid women look alike. Tamar must know the man. Women always know. Go back with Healy, find and challenge the bastard. Let him bloody well fork out for her keep in a decent place so she can have her wain peacefully. God save me, I might kill him if he got tough. Forget about it. Not your affair now. . . .

The children are forcing him to recognize them and recognition is their human due, but it is like sitting in a toilet with them peeping round the door. To blunt the a-human edge of their curiosity, he speaks softly to them. His voice makes them look at each other and laugh together. To stop their tumbril merriment, he asks:

'Why are ye not at school?'

'We have the coul. . . .' the girl says. She is the biggest one.

'We wur late. Mother didn't get up early enough,' the second boy adjusts.

'Shush. It's the coul we have,' the girl chides against his domestic disloyalty.

'I haven't a coul!'

'Ye have, then!'

'What are your names?'

She looks at him with a sudden serious grey-eyed gleam of beauty, a moment of open unfallen childishness that warms his heart but then she turns to her brothers and they all laugh again.

He turns away and tries to forget the children, but like

three nails in his shoe they press closer. They overcome him: he cannot breathe under their weight, half of him still trailing down from the lakes.

'Cathleen Angela's me name,' the girl is saying, her voice housewife acute. 'He's Vincent Paul after me father an' he's Francis Ignatius,' she adds, skewering each boy with a nail-chewed finger. 'What's yours?' Whatch yers . . . she says in her Dublin twang. She is making little breasts on her bony chest, early—too early. In another year she will be a woman, flaunting the immortal apple: her girlhood dead. A pity—childhood should be long and clean among green growing things.

'Simon is my name,' he whispers, as though giving her a part of his better self.

Without any malice little Vincent announces solemnly: 'Ye're a bleddy heretic.'

'No, son, never heretic to youth. . . .' He shivers and the squalid street grows darker, feet whispering heresy to the pavement. Cathleen shushes her brother, slapping his undiplomatic ear with a cobra-swift hand. He kicks back and she gives him a harder clout, making him bawl and knuckle-gouge his eyes for maternal sympathy. Simon suddenly gets angry.

'Lookee here, me little boyo,' he says like he would to an adult. 'Ye snivelling little maneen. Who in God's name taught ye to say a thing like that? Did ye?'

Wide-eyedly, Cathleen shakes her head.

'Did ye, Francis Ignatius?'

'No. . . .'

'Well, it's a damn awful thing to say to anyone. It's a dirty ould word like a moth-eaten curse an' it has caused more misery than a war. Did your ould man tell ye? Answer me?'

They shake their heads.

'Look, I'm an Irishman for better or for worse an' me name is Simon Green. Ireland is green an' I'm green—green as grass is. If ye could see me soul, it's green too. I'm a man,

a two-armed, two-legged man—bit of a bastard but that's beside your point. Don't ye ever let me hear ye say such a thing again. Do ye hear?'

'Yis, sur,' Cathleen says respectfully.

'Do ye hear me, Vincent Paul?'

'Yis, sur.'

'All right. Now go an' drown your shamrock an' let me continue with collecting meself. Gwan.'

'What's in t'can, sur?' Cathleen asks and the others nod.

'It is a fish—a fish slim an' swift as an arrow. Get me some water an' I'll let ye see it.'

Cathleen leads him to a tap on the warehouse wall. . . .

'There now—see?'

'Holy Janey mack, it's a snake!'

'No, it's a fish—an eel—one of the best fish the Lord ever made. Look at him now, miles from his ancestral home an' lively as a bee on a dry June day. Now, go away and play.'

'Can we not stay wit ye?' Cathleen asks pleadingly.

'Well . . . I'm busy. An' besides, ye make me sad for many reasons with your big grey eyes.'

'But ye're not doin' anythin'. And we like ye.'

'Yeh—I like you, too. If I had the three of ye for a year on the lake shore I'd teach ye how not to be afraid.'

Healy comes to the door with the mother who calls over perfunctorily to her wains not to be annoying the gentleman.

'I'm no gentleman, m'am,' he advises. 'Thank ye all the same.'

She is a pretty woman with heavy green eyes all inward and dead, weary with saint-hunts across the valleys of her soul; giving nothing out but a vagueness of worry, life preying on her mind—faith, worries and child in that order; expecting nothing new, strange or beautiful and certain half-sure that Peter will anon make room for her among the Gaelic faithful where she will rest, all worries shed. Strange how this fantastic and unsubstantiated pledge of peace keeps so many people going. O live oul horse an' ye'll get grass.

'Mister . . . mister?' Cathleen as spokeswoman.

'Yes?'

• 'Are ye a Cathlick?'

'Sure, sure I am. I can say the Lord's Prayer in Gaelic.

Ar a-Atair atá ar neamh . . .

Mrs Laverty has hardly understood half of what Healy has been trying to say. He only wants cash for the potatoes. For all his broad talk, he is shy with women. The missing husband comes smartly, primly round the corner, demonstrating that he is going somewhere just as important as the place from whence he came. He slows up and nods nonchalantly to Healy, the right sort of indifferent nod for a workman. The wife withdraws again, seeming shy of her big belly before the man who filled it, since he glances at her coldly as if to say she should not show herself in public.

As he talks he looks ahead with melancholy at other thoughts, glancing once at the rectangular house of potatoes within his warehouse, explaining that the potato market is nervous. Slack, very slack. Too many ° . . speaking sideways over the lip-held cigarette that jerks up and down with his words. He is a tall spare man who would strip like a nobbly fence-post; dark blue bow tie on a white shirt, black striped trousers, black double-breasted jacket, black homburg curved to his right eyebrow, cracked black shoes with crooked heels, brows bushy and mephistophelean, his lower lip moving unceasingly, big straight nose, narrow face, thin throat with baubling apple, white thin hands rubbing round each other as though chilly although the day is soggy mild.

He never draws on the cigarette, allowing it to smoulder away and periodically blowing along it to remove the drooping cone of ash, then flicking his vest with his third and little fingers as a habit, and coughing at a constant bubble in his throat, sometimes coughing strongly and removing the cigarette reluctantly, the adam's apple leaping up and down behind the bow tie, the blue veins in his sallow neck bulging.

Carefully, he removes the stub with a thumb and forefinger, groping with the other hand for the packet and taking out a new cigarette, putting it into his mouth and kindling it off the butt, closing the packet with one hand and pocketing it again with a couple of starter puffs on the new fag. Were fags cheaper than matches he would save money that way.

He does not offer Healy a smoke. Coolly, Simon goes over: 'Excuse me, sur. Wud ye be havin' a shmoke an ye, now?' he asks. Healy grins.

'Whaaaa . . . smoke. . . .'

The awakened grey brown-mottled eyes, the small twitch of impatience. No children lisp this sire's return. Probably hot-sexed with misery-worry, the one ego-act in an imitative life, tuppling the wife jack-rabbit quick with a whiskey hard and leaving her unsatisfied to gnaw his lower lip against the pillow, hating her guts and his own for the state they are in and hoping for the smother of sleep.

Absently, he hands over the packet. Simon takes two fags and gives one to Healy. Laverty does not notice. He is not innately mean. He is made mean by worry.

'Thank ye, sur.' He frowns absent dismissal.

He is about fifteen years beyond the wife. By the fine lattice-work of blue veins on his cheeks he is a blood-pressure man and a whiskey drinker, spending two hundred a year on liquor and fags, God save him: three years in arrears and always working out new schemes to convince a dozen anxious Pauls that he should pay a dozen Peters something on account so he may borrow from them to keep the Pauls quiet. . . . Lost man in a river of rising debt; lost man in a second-hand life, no part of it his own idea. Poor bastard, his time of true maturity a nightmare.

All this ties up in Simon's mind with other unremembered things which the city stirs in him.

O Laverty, I have lived your life in parts but never got in so deep. I saw the pounce behind the make-believe, too proud of the man in me to consent. . . . O God and Laverty, do not

make me re-dream the impotence of repetitive evil all over again, for I am second-sighted to the unseen wound and thrice aborted hope: the lakes, the lakes, the harmlessness of level water. . . . This gombeen-man holds the key to future riddles—now, what? What have I to do with ye, Mister Vincent I. P. Lavery? Nothing. Nothing save the shared pinch of life, fresh air of a sort, and somnolent humanity. . . .

Lavery is wearing his solemnly rapt business-face. Healy keeps gargling for the cheque, ha-ha, himm-himm. Lavery mutters he will post it on, implying with fundamental scorn that such is proper business. His bluff makes his lip blip more actively as his eyes strain against Healy's cash-down stance. He looks up at the sky—not much hope there for the living: pavement . . . no hope there, a dropped tanner would cause a stampede. Healy has been instructed to collect the cheque. There is nothing personal in his pressure. He would give the potatoes away had his boss said so.

'I'll send it on first post tomorrow,' Lavery is muttering, half-sure of his statement, able to look at Healy for the first time. 'Aye, first post tomorrow,' he says again, his mind having already made the deal.

Healy shrugs, helpless and embarrassed, hearing his curse-a-word boss who, like Lavery, drinks too much and is also a pair of years behind, swearing pointedly at the non-appearance of the fornicating cheque, although he would himself have said with mutual largesse: O that's all right now. Come an' have a chestwarmer. Money when we're dead. . . .

Two gombeens, two corbies, cawing over mythical deals, picking the white bones of Ireland which should by now be reposing in an ossuary under a couple of thousand masses.

The dark depths of spring, that was when the grass was in its roots; and now, a year half wasted save for the lakes. Weep, bastard, weep dry remorseless tears, your year is away. Weep with impotence for even strong men cannot wholly defeat the glar on the bottom of their environments. Go back

and make a winter-home, build house of sods, creep into your bracken-bed and bear it out till spring; learn from the wind, it blows where it bloody well likes. . . .

'Mister?'

'Yis, Cathlín, me darlin' ?'

'Vincie wants t'know why ye doan't git y'r hair cut?'

'Tell Vincie from me to wash his face an' blow his nose.'

'Snot durty!'

'God help him if that colour's natural. But look, Cathlín me love, with your nice grey eyes, in a couple more years ye'll be poutin' your chests up to the boys, so go away an' play till that happens.'

'Where's the cheque, Magnus? Napper'll have a handful of your short hairs!'

'He says he'll send it. . . .'

'Napper will jump on his hat, Magnus. Helltomesowl, no fornicating cheque—no fornicating spuds!'

'Awarr. . . .' Magnus nods unhappily.

Mrs Laverty stands guard inside her doorway, looking from husband to potatoes in the out-of-sight warehouse, nervous that the lingering Healy may load them back on the truck.

Healy's face is long and painful. Laverty turns to the house, making an I-told-you-so moue to the wife. She looks at him as though he were coming from a risky steal, blood on his hands. Simon wants to ask him something and follows. 'Mister Laverty?'

He stops in the middle of a stride, shrinking to the size of his youngest boy as he shoots over his defending shoulder one crafty cornered eye.

'Excuse me, sur. I on'y wanted t'ax ye somethin'.'

'What's it?' he demands sharply, Simon's shoddiness and country tongue bringing him safely back to earth, nothing to fear.

'A name . . . a name, it is. Whin I can remimber it, sur.'

'What name?' he keeps his eye on Simon's knees, head

and horns lowered. Simon says: 'Palmer? Ye are often up in the country, sur. I—I just saw a hunch 'bout the name Palmer. Corran an' Palmer. Maybe it's on'y the Corran spuds. . . .'

'Palmer. . . .' Laverty repeats. 'Palmer?' He is suspicious again, also his woman, glancing around with swift eye-slink and muttering 'Palmer?' again unwillingly. The name fears them both.

'Aye, Palmer.'

'I do, yes, himm . . . name of me bank manager, it is. Not a Corran man. Why?'

No catch. . . . 'I'm sorry I disturbed you. God knows ye've sufficient on your plate as it is. Only way to save the bacon is to hook the fat out of the fire, sur.'

'Himph. . . .'

'Look, sur. A fool's advice: an owl van an' a horse'd do ye an' the family rightly. Take the free road, why don't ye?'

Himph. . . . He looks at his wife. She looks at Simon. Anything any man might say to either will be suspected. Worry and environment have frozen them. . . .

'*Beannaict leat go fóill, mo cara.* . . . ' He wears a golden fainne in his buttonhole.

'*Beannaict leat.* . . . ' Laverty dismisses absently, blowing the ash off his fag and knocking the dust off his vest as he goes through his door.

'Wha' did y'say t'him?' Healy is curious.

'Och, nothing. . . . ' Simon does not want to reopen the Palmer case.

'He's a hard bastard t'pay,' Healy complains uncomfortably as they head for the eating house.

'Why deal with him? Why dicker with debtors? Forgive debts as we would be forgiven. . . . If all the world's debts were cancelled, Magnus, we'd be in exactly the same place as we are now but minus worry. The Old Testament Jew had far more sense. Do ye know? In the famine days when three million Irishmen were starving, dying, Irish gommeens

were vulturing on their hunger at a hundred per cent. The Rebels should have left landlords alone an' gone after the gombeens.'

Healy laughs, whistling his breath back again. They eat a good meal—big spud deal, five murphies on the plate. The café owner, Liam, is a Corran man and puts up helpings-and-a-half of roast beef, rice pudding and tea, coming over between customers to ask about parish comings and goings; a pot-bellied, sad-eyed man married to a cook who has made him into a waiter. They started with three tables in the parlour and kept pulling down dividing walls and building on at the back.

'Don't stand aroun', Liam, avic, the woman wants to be taking the money.'

'Aye, har har har . . . money.' He shuffles off, the dirty white apron like a maternity smock, his face wryly melancholy, becoming suddenly ashamed of food-peddling, delivering an order, wiping his hands on his hips and nipping over for more home-talk; youth-days of no money and no wife, but peace of a kind.*

'Liam?'

'Aye?'

'Don't worry. Ye are feeding people's hunger with reasonable food at a fair cost.'

'Agh, I git fed up at times, Simon.'

'Sure . . . but ye are sitting pretty, if ye were your own boss. Hang your pants up on a nail an' when the wife goes to put them on in the mornin' just say ye'll kick her ass to mass an' back if she touches them.'

'Har har har har . . . begod, ye've somethin' there!' But he peers a whispered look down the passage to the cookhouse.

'Li-am! Li-amm!'

'Thar she blows. Tell her I want ten fags.'

He jumps and scurries, his two hands held out ready to take the plates.

Healy has to go to the North Wall to collect a return load

of cement. Simon is nervous again and wants to hide in the homey café where the brogues of Ireland meet: stay on here and go straight back with Healy.

‘See ye here tomorra’, Simon.’

He lounges behind the wheel and starts the engine, growling the big truck down the narrow streets to the Quays, the red braking lights winking an ominous farewell. Simon follows slowly to the Quays. It is city lunchtime and the streets are thick with cyclists and fixed-faced people hastening home to feed. O many people, too many people.

Water, the mirrored sacred alder. Liffey in her ashlar gorge, slow turn and the rising fish. How hell can I sell eels? All wrong—never could give a thing away much less sell it. Tried to sell insurance policies once and only convinced a woman she would have to die and that insurance was a gesture of distrust.

Five hundred prime two-pound eels sleeking and sliding through their wire cages, slim as dreams, those gentle silver-bellied fish out of a pre-diluvian world. Go home and cut the cages, let them go to find their own road down to the sea and Tír na Óg. . . .

‘It’s a nice sort afa day?’ an old man is saying.

‘Aye . . . tomorrow’ll be just as good if the sun. . . .’

‘Aye, if t’sun. . . . Ye haven’t a tanner an ye?’ He coughs. He coughs convincingly, his dirty hand cupped over his green-fanged old mouth.

‘Who are ye?’

‘Who, me?’ He looks over his shoulder as though asking the thing behind him who he is. ‘I’m—I’m John Toler.’

‘Ye are not too sure?’

‘Toler, it is, John. T’tanner, sur . . .?’ False-whimsical.

‘If ye hadn’t slipped in the sir I might have parted, Toler John. Away wid ye. . . .’

‘Ye won’t be givin’ a pore man a tanner for the cough, now?’

‘I don’t want the bloody cough. It’s a put-an wan, anyway.’

‘Snot.’

‘ ’Tis.’

‘ ’Snot. . . . Hawrk-arwk-cahoot cahoot ah-haw. . . .’

‘I’ve wan of me own like that—lissen. Ha-awark bark-hark ha-ha ho-ho . . . spit—see? It’ll sell it to ye. I’m a dead man walkin’ around an’ ye ax me for a tanner. Are ye married?’

‘I buried the wife five year ago, God rhest her sowl, for I niver could. Will ye buy a few pills for that cough?’ He delves into a pocket and holds a round matchboard box in the palm of his hand. ‘They’re rale good.’

I’ll never sell an eel here. Why in hell did I ever consent to come. Greed, it is. Lucey and Devlin can’t bear to let five hundred eels go. I’m a gombeen to their greed. Never could get them to see greed as work’s lowest motive. Greed is fear and unfaith. But there’s always a cause behind a cause. Why, then, am I here? I was happy. I could have been building my hut. One of life’s finest things is the building of a habitation, a fine little hut with its ass to the wind and a bright fire in the mouth of it, malice to none, hurt to none: the five essentials—warmth, food, water, a dry bed and the right to think. Maybe the hut is not the way for me, but what other way is there with civilization cruel-mad and faith an old shift off a secondhand peg?

Leery and aware of every passer-by, trying to see, greet and meet every individual within his ken as he would identify the life in a living wood. Soon it exhausts him: one man cannot hold the world’s pass against the legions of anonymity. He walks a little, then stands long as he dare, closing his eyes to find himself. If he stands too long with the paint-pot in his hand, people stare at him. If it were a new paint-pot or if he had an old brush in it, people wouldn’t mind.

People no more real than actors on a film strip, dead but still acting on, flea-pit by flea-pit, Canton, Cork to Cincinnati.

O God in heaven how many blinding blinded cities have I seen, endured, suffered alongside every suffering citizen, people drowning in their dreams, threshing to get their

hands on the straws. . . . What their grey worlds are, I do not know; how they conceive and dream or borrow from each other's emotions, I do not know; what their beauty is, their pain, sufferings, I do not know: each man and woman with their own idea of heaven and hell, life sandwiched in between the pure space of heaven and the grey pasture lands of death.

O . . . people, people all passionate with hand-me-down patriotism, as they are told to be; able only to act transcendently when tight, lusting, or asleep. Myself the same. O lovely humankind lost in the thickets of their souls . . . lips to be kissed, hands taken, words to be said, curses forgiven. O hearts never heal, they just get used to pain, shrivelling like owl spuds. Think, Simon, just think. Ye can't be jailed for it, here or in heaven. Go to any one person and say softly: how is life? How is the day, the sun? Impossible! Suspicion, pride, fear, the smell of a heretic and myself the same. I am the same, by pride. I share all idols, slagheaps of dead thoughts dumped by dead men, spring a sadness, autumn a funeral service. Hell of a way to have to live. I have no dreams to sell this city. . . .

That lovely Jewish girl: Miriam! She's in Dublin. Oh, believe me if all those endearing young charms . . . why did I think of that, now? Were to fade . . . fade? Yes. The restorations of the pseudo-spring, ass's milk and crisping pins. Seven years and spring—our spring. O little Miriam by the bulrush lakes who never knew the fierce destruction of my love. One so pretty would be married, bedded, bred by now. Old Testament times then, youth-times and youth by its nature impatient to be gone. Turn back the past's rice-paper pages: my past is rich as Adam's. I remember every sun-gleam on a leaf and every shower of rain. These things walk with me, people fall away. I'm young out of time and old before time: I'm an oddity or else the rest are out of step. O Tamar seven years ago. Tamar the child, compact as born, and now a woman big with child, and

every parish Pilate sicking his frustration unto her; scapegoat for accumulated parish sin. Old Miss drycrotch Palmer hate-envying her an' trying to find out what the sport was like, looking at her own crinkled belly that will never rise now to anything save the gases of corruption. . . .

O the blazes . . . my terrible Celtic perfectionism that would deny God Almighty the travail of experience. By the measure of a year, a life means nothing. Life is nothing but eternity by instalments. Eels *now*, not fallen and forgotten women. They'll have ye for nympholepsy, idolizing unflowered girls. Simon, ye are little better than an old pervert.

To dodge the stifling human pressures he tenses like a sprinter on the kerbstone, timing the varied traffic and dashing zig-zag through a lull over to the quay wall. The cool contented river, tar-black and varnish-thick, glutting its tide, making its last quiet life-gestures before it takes the sea: four swans with ugly cygnets touching the water with distasteful bills as though against their will they had thus to forage for existence.

Get hold of Healy before he leaves an' get t'hell out of here. . . .

The ringing bicycles skip an office worker over the cobbles to the wall. He nips round front wheels and sways round back ones, hunching his shoulders against the abuse of the irate bells. He hoists himself unto the pitted table of the coping stones to eat his sandwiches, smiling a little to himself as he unties the parcel on his thighs and winds the white string round two fingers: a thrifty man. He is so ordinary he could stand for a thousand men in any parade, symbol for a million men who fare forth from office gloom to eat their lunches in the sun.

Gulls gather, flying close as if they knew him, standing on air, some lighting on the wall and walking near, looking sideways and seeming to cogitate whether they might risk pouncing on the man's daily bread.

He taunts a waif of memory in Simon's mind: gulls and people eating by a stony strand, trees, wind-whisper in reeds, the green lakes moving past the hills to their sea.

Simon sets the paint can on the wall and fumbles spastically for a fag. This man is emptying him, driving him back into the doze-dream in the lorry and he resents and resists the compulsion of mere mystical perception, insisting that what is to be seen and understood will be seen and understood consciously on daytime earth, the soul too prone to harlotry in other dimensions. The coffin-nail of peace: he fills his lungs with smoke, living on smoke for a whole minute until he can feel every cell in his burned lungs, the heart taking up the drug's load and beating steadily.

Oh, leave this man alone: and godsake don't spin inquisitional cobwebs. Leave him alone. . . .

But, Simon, he is familiar?

Okay. Ye have seen him before or else he reminds ye of someone. Either way, ye'll discover the connexion without recourse to guesswork. Humanity shares endless native moments. . . .

Absently, the office worker pulls off a bit of crust and tosses it into the Liffey's sewered flow and all the gulls, new parchment and young brown-mottled, cluck-chuckle and dive and drop to beat the insurging swans to the morsel, one old gull tumbling on to it and snatching it from under a swan's bill, slide-slicing down breeze and rising still-winged on the unseen updraught. The swans turned slowly about with surly fastidious faces and gazed upwards in hope of more manna, the remaining gulls mewing pitifully. Nothing very remarkable in all this. Gulls are very watchable birds. But in an odd and unphysical way this office worker suggests a gull to Simon. His putty cheeks are hollow and his chin recedes yet juts out; not a strong chin, a stubborn one, a mean one. He seems bachelor tidy, wears decent shoes with the toes turned up; heel-frayed creased flannels and tweed jacket with black leather cuffs and elbows. He is vain and has

spent time oiling and combing the dirty-dun hair over the three-inch bald spot: not a bank clerk, not natty enough for a coffer-keeper; a clerk, maybe a lawyer's clerk or even a bookie's clerk. As he eats rapidly he thinks rapidly, sometimes muttering, but not worried or nervous and quite satisfied with himself. He does not seem to have a nose. He has ears, large ears, and they could tell his fortune like a palm.

He looks over the flowing street pageant, coldly and indifferently as a gull, interested only in anything he can stuff into the crop of his mind. He is a lonely man but does not disagree with loneliness. His mind is full of hard abstractions cast there like pellets; no feeling for the warmth of a new truth, an acutely prudent respect for all small laws.

Leave him be: nondescript guy on his lunch-break, poor bastard; gaoled five and a half days a week for a wage to exist, wage and existence synonymous: not judgement, compassion. . . .

But Simon watches, hoping for one gesture that will prove or dissipate the familiarity. Absently, the man teases the gulls. He tears off scraps of paper, wadding them up and flipping them into the air, the gulls swallowing some in flight before they realize their error, others falling to the swans which are wiser, letting them drift downstream after cursory inspection. But one old gull is edging closer to the sandwich held too far from the man's body. With a strike of unseen swiftness the bird has it, flying off with a harmonica of bread across its beak. Many others chase after it, only to come straggling back, yarping their discontent.

The man is annoyed, cursing and spitting bread crumbs at the birds, but they refuse offence, death by hunger their single fear. He eats his last sandwich, saving an inch of crust which he screws viciously up in the paper. Down after the cachet the gulls go, two trying to open the paper on the water while, in tiers, the others flurry above branding fantastically beautiful wing forms on the air, dazzling the eyes with movement, afraid of each other by an awful constant

of mortal fear; many others come crying from afar, making a blinding gullery soaked in fear. A swan sails in and tries to nuggle the bread out of its ark but with only one beak-finger it cannot get purchase on the sliding water and bobs it up and down like a fisherman's float until a gull sweeps in and snatches it, the others following in caterwauling chase, screaming.

'My God,' Simon mutters, offended and amazed, his sight blurred by the quick-feather movements against the sun-shone water. . . .

*To hell with it, home to the lakes, pass winter cleanly—
come spring new hopes will chime: dig the weeds in your own
plot. . . .*

The man's upper lip curls in a small canine snarl as a pretty cyclist goes past below him, her skirt over her knees, his eyes following the white napes of her driving thighs.

Yes!

Years ago this man came to me father's with one of Palmer's cows. He was scared of the bull but watched the jump from behind a safe half-door, a smirk on his face, dreaming in his genitals, envying the bull its work. I can still see the expression on his face when me father rubbed the cow's ass with a nettle to make her hold the charge. . . . The famous uncle. Get your old can, find Healy, take Ophion home. What's done is done.

'What's in t'can?' the man calls down, friendly-curious.

Simon stops and takes off the nail-perforated lid, his hand trembling, holding up the can. The man goggles.

'Janey, a snake!'

'No. An eel. A Corran eel.'

'Are ye a Corran man?'

'I am, or I was an' I may well be one again.'

As though hypnotized, he drops off the wall, pretending great interest in the fish, asking:

'An' can ye keep it alive in the can, now?'

He stares at the eel, but sneaks swift glances at Simon. He has a certain empty handsomeness, but his good teeth

are rotting away. He is not a man at all. He is a delayed boy unable to fill the bowl of his youth with man-ness.

'Is you mother dead, now?' asks Simon.

'No. Alive.'

'Alive, alive O. Father, now?'

'He died years ago. What are ye askin' for?'

'It's a wise child. . . .'

'Aye? Do I know ye?'

'Could we all see each other we would all know each other.'

'I've a married sister in Corran,' he volunteers negligently, knocking crumbs off his green sweater and following a young girl's behind as it up-downs along the sidewalk, the heels throwing her pelvis forward so the rounding thighs come through the light dress each stride. . . .

'Bushed bird always better 'n bedded bride.'

'Wha . . . oh, aye! Har har har. . . . Where are ye frum?'

Simon is sick with rage and fear in his stomach. He should have walked away. 'Have ye ever thought about being dead?'

'No. ha ha ha ha. . . O?'

'No, I'm not crackers. It's a reasonable question. It's the one thing we're dead sure of. You are afflicting me with the thought of death . . . now, why? Have ye killed someone or do ye intend to kill someone. . . .'

'It's not a bad day,' he says with a small shrug, going back into the more comfortable burrows of his mind and humming a little tune through his nose.

'What is that tune?'

'What tune?' He does not remember humming it. He does not remember anything. He lives by habit.

'It is a sad little tune.'

'Aye . . . 'tis, 'tis.' He frowns, looking at his thoughts and then quickly over at Simon as though he had just registered his presence.

The tune somehow pulls everything together and, sweating

with a suddenness of sorrow, Simon asks softly: 'What's to be done about your niece, Tamar?'

'Tamar . . .?' He stands very still, blinking. 'What *can* be done? Me sister's near out of her mind.'

'No need to drive Tamar the same road.'

'It's a damned disgrace, it is. She was a fine girl.'

'She still is.'

'Agh! Ruined.' Impatiently, scornfully.

'I can't think with your thinking wasping round me.'

'What's wrong wid ye?'

'Vipers throw their skins an' make themselves tender again.'

'What are ye talkin' about?'

'Spring is serpent time. . . . No I'm not crazy. I am the sanest fool to walk these midden streets since the Blessed Brian Boru. But why do I have to mistrust ye so sorely? What have ye done that makes your mind stench?'

'Jaysus, you're nuts!'

'Nuts on the holy hazel! What about Tamar?'

'Agh, she turned out a little whore!'

'The stone, the stone, the harlot-stone . . . did ye whore her?'

'In the name of God . . .!'

'Whatever name ye fancy. I've heard tell of a parson who used to put the Bible under her ass as a sort of a charm.'

'What are ye sayin'?'

'When were ye last in Corran?'

'Last Easter. Why?'

'The Easter get, the Christmas wain. . . . Look, I'm not blaming ye. I won't say a word about it. You put a hundred notes in the Bank of Ireland in Tamar's name so she can hide some place quiet.'

'In the name of God, what are ye tryin' t'tell me?'

'Why are ye so scared?'

'I'm not scared! I—I—I'm on'y sorry for me sister an' brother-in-law.'

'I doubt if you've ever supped sorrow for anyone but yourself.'

'What's it to ye, anyway?' He is alive now in all his parts, his lower lip making an ugly U. 'Ye're might inter-ested yourself.' He looks around, gathering bravery off the crowd.

'I loved the child in Tamar. I neither wanted to marry nor to make her. There are only ever a few people in the whole world with whom we can have a closeness that feeds us contentment an' peace.'

'I don't know what t'hell ye're sayin'!'

'I don't suppose ye do. I made Tamar swear she'd keep her legs together till she met an' married some decent guy.'

'Are ye insinuatins' . . . ?'

'No. I'm telling you.'

'God, I could sue ye for this!'

'You do that. . . .'

'Janey Christmas, you're nuts. Grangegorman, begod! Aye, Grangegorman—ye an' the bleddy eel! I've a gud notion t'kick your arse.'

'That's not a good notion at all. I wouldn't have me oul arse kicked by the primate of Armagh town.'

'Gagh. . . . ye're a bleddy lunatic.'

'Relatively speaking. We are all relatively insane, now. But what if the child is born with your big ears?'

'Will ye stop sayin' that!'

'What would ye do if she put the finger on ye?'

'Hagh . . . she hasn't enough fingers on her two han's!'

'O Tamar, Tamar. . . .'

'Jaysus, you're cryin'. Ye must be nuts. . . .'

'Look, you do what I say. Put the hundred quid in the bank for Tamar an' I'll get her out of the country.'

'Och, don't be fockin' stewpid. She wus a little whore.'

'Never a whore without a standing cock, ye self-righteous little bastard.'

The cool and avid gulls have returned from their paper-

chase and drift in a halo round the man's head. He wants to go but is scared to go, asking: 'Who are ye, anyways?'

'Ye have a strain of pure criminal indifference, my friend.'

'Who are ye?'

'Och, I'm only a sort of a tinker.'

'What are ye so inter-ested in Tamar Palmer for?'

'I've told ye.'

'Agh, ye don't expect me to believe that troipe.'

'Believe what ye like.'

Simon reaches forward gently and takes his right hand, holding it firmly by the palm. 'Don't struggle or I'll break the wrist.'

'What are ye goin' t'do?'

'You swear to me ye'll put that money in the bank this day.'

He tries to snatch away his hand. 'Oh, me wrist! Ye're hurtin' me!' He eyes the indifferent crowd.

'I'm not going to swing for ye. I'm going to throw ye over that wall an' jump in after ye an' drown ye an' then pull ye out for a leather medal. Why don't ye shout? Or are ye afraid of what I'll tell the papers? Ye can get ten years in this religious country for incest.'

'Look . . . lemme go—lemme tell ye.'

'Don't tell me anything.'

'Look—lissen to me! Ye're only half right—on'y half right. It's the Godstrewth I'm sayin'. I—I wasn't t'o'ny wan. She asked me—came into me bed in t'night—aye, several nights. I swear on God I'm tellin' the truth. She can't name any man? She had me an' several others in t'same twenty-four hours—I know that for a fact. She couldn't git enough.'

'Perhaps. . . .' Simon whispers. He feels his hand letting him go. *I know ye now*. 'Beat it. Get out of my sight.'

'Lissen, it's the Godstrewth. . . .'

'Beat it!'

He whiffles back his broker's cuff as though he had just been confessing a day at Dalkey, looking at his fine gold

watch, whispering confidentially, 'I swear on God I've told you the truth. . . .'

'Beat it, brother. O Christ little brother. . . .'

The gulls wafted about, making filth beautiful again. Nature was wonderful and was very deft, never getting her fingers dirty. Simon picks up the paint can. *Thanks be to God I didn't kill him. Enough ghosts going without making more. I shouldn't have come here. Shouldn't have come here, Ophion. This cloaca of thwarted expectations packed with stage Irishmen. . . .*

Poor Tamar. She'll have to have the wain. And I'll probably have to marry her myself. I saved her life once. . . . I dunno. . . . Ophion, I am lost.

By now it is afternoon. Healy will go home by Gardener Street, always goes that way from the North Wall, round behind Custom House, up North Circular Road: if I can find my way. Where am I now? Liffey—roughly east-west. . . . Must have a drink; must sterilize myself against hate, hurt and fear. . . . Whiskey is a good thing for men like me who know no difference between the living and the dead; who cannot tell spirit from sod . . . yet. Someday, praise God, sod will speak with a bright and brotherly tongue and say God be with ye, I am life. I'll not walk on sod then. I'll lift it up, kiss it and eat it. But in the meantime, may the gods forgive me for a rogue thinker. I'll have to marry Tamar Palmer and father her much-begotten wain to save my own sense of peace. I only ever wished her to be happy. Ye may spoil both of us, Tamar. I could have danced at your wedding an' played with your children in the grass.

Himph . . . all looking at me talking to meself.

I see no face. I see no features I know, hear no voice, touch no friendly hand. These people are jealous of their lonely fears—loving, killing, raping, greeding, weeping in the safe silences of their minds; scared to be judged since they are quick to judgement—judgement their only law.

I haven't that much pity to give away. I'm too poor. Anon, the poor in spirit may be blessed but the going is hard. Healy's the man for me. Home to our mountains: take Tamar out of purgatory. She can please herself when she gets her shape back.

But *uisce beata*, O *uisce beata* or I'll round the bend, do something daft like climbing up Dan O'Connell and declaring Catholic Emancipation all over again. . . . No exhibitionism, now, Simon, avic. Ye are a man again, two-legged, bowelled and balled with the rest of them. Don't be freckened, now. Just go quietly with the little can as if ye were

going somewhere important. This bitter pavement is a soft lakestrand, people fishes in the water, buildings hills hanging in the sky. . . .

He turns up the Quay to O'Connell Street in search, not of stimulant, of a soporific: not to feel good or bad, not to feel at all. Within an hour or two he will be back in the workshop of autumn, sweating the alcohol out of his heart and no longer in this petrified unseasonableness that is becoming full of the Grey and Homeless Ones who mime and dance, their mime a sadness, their dance a long sorrow; who live, perforce, as gulls on excrement; envy and greed their poisoned food, looking for youth and finding premature age, hearing the platitude but seldom the new word; the gaol law of heredity instead of the gospel of life.

He tries to hurry, to thread through the lunch-tide, stepping off the kerb until jangling bicycle bells force him back into the herd, the paint pot in his right hand, the left arm circled around it. He sweats in the anonymous jostling. Nobody cares for nobody—everyone trying to beat the clock, shoving like bullocks wedging through a gap, people annoyed at people and muttering impatiently.

Over the racket he hears someone shouting. The wild voice rides clearly above the crowd's brooling. He holds his breath and listens in case his own mind has given blind tongue in general resentment since humans should not have to treat each other as driven beasts. Strange: he has not heard the crowd-sound before—a constant torrent-tone, soulless as gravel spilling off a cart, wind in a lost wood at night, unremitting as water-flow: time's refugees running from nowhere to nowhere. . . .

'Godamn ye all! Ye basthards!'

A crazy-faced, or else a saint-faced, old trollop stalks along the gutter in a big man's boots laced with blonde, hairy string, her head held stiffly forward, her backside stuck out,

her right arm swinging a clenched fist, the left arm clamped round a wadge of newspapers.

'Whore's basthards! Gwan . . . gwan, now!'

Every time a bicycle or a car passes too near she breaks into fresh shouts without turning her head as though she can sense their threat, striding on in her seven-mile boots. Only a few people evince a mild interest. Maybe they all think she is sane as lunatics think their companions sane: maybe she is sane, all the rest quite mad. A bicycle comes too close to her and she spits at it, making the boy wobble and cannon into a nice young girl who falls on her back, the bicycle on top of her. The onlookers are not too crazy not to see her slim tender thighs and although her cheek and arm are grazed and bleeding, she firstly pulls down her skirt. Were she for heaven with a broken neck, she would still arrange her skirt.

The old shuler with her man-capped head is spanging on, cleaving a way through the throng with her bitter prayer, her voice a flail. Simon wants to follow in her wake singing yea man, hallelujah. He presses left, carried diagonally to the wall around a burl of people that slows and splits the current like a boulder. There is an argument in the middle of the knot, folk stopping to crane over each other's shoulders to see what goes on. A tall policeman swims into the gathering, splitting it open. Two men face each other in the kernel, preparing to fight, one with his jacket half off.

'Now, now . . . come on. I want no trouble here!' The big policeman parts them, looking down with a bored expression. They both turn on him, one holding a finger under his nose.

'You keep out'a this!'

The policeman shrugs, pinching his chin thoughtfully. A little stout priest comes under his elbows and lays his hands firmly on the antagonists' shoulders, pulling their heads together and speaking to them. They nod in a surly way and part.

‘Break it up, now! Move an! Keep movin.’

Along the wall the current is slower and less turgid. A tramp comes to meet Simon; brown jacket with soggy pockets, nut-brown face with big black timid eyes under an old felt hat with a greasy band, black hair in eaves over ears and over the jacket collar: God above, it is himself. He has not seen himself as a whole in a mirror for six months; the man in the mind and *this* man total strangers. Solemnly, he salutes the tramp.

‘How’ya bud? What d’ye know?’

The bum is silent and ashamed. It is a terrible thing thus suddenly to be reappointed to ownership of the forgotten outside self. It should be against the law to have mirrors in a public place. People could be shocked out of their right minds. I hope ye see more in me than I can see in you, brother. But for Godsake don’t pounce on me like that again without due warning.

He moves on, aware now of himself and thrice as nervous and unsure. Devlin and Lucey should never have let ye out in public like that. They’re cold bastards—cynical and aloof, always out for Joe—ticht ticht. Irishmen all over. Not their fault—only educated to live on people, not with them. To hell with it. Cut all the bloody strings and stand alone. The house of sods on the sweet bare lakestrand, a black pot for spuds and a black pan, a double bed of bracken on a heather spring for Tamar an’ yourself, the wain in a hammock made out of a sack, a string on it to avoid getting up at night to rock it. Food in plenty and milk from a neighbour’s cow. A man could starve a long time on beauty an’ the peace of beauty. I’ll live on it for a year or so, watch dawns at labour, days going down to death. I’ll read Tamar Whitman and the white songs of David by candlelight. O enough—enough for any sane man.

A pointsman with lovely white gauntlets stops the main-street traffic and the crowd breaks into various streams, most of it spating across to Eden Quay. It seems the whole popula-

tion wants to go to Eden Quay. At last he stands in a pub's ever-welcoming door and thankfully walks into the cloistered scented bar. The barman looks doubtful.

'Och, never mind the binding, man!'

'A pint, is it?'

'No. Pints are too wet and long. I'd like two double whiskeys in two separate containers, with a bottle of bass for a chaser. If ye don't mind, now?'

'Cost ye plinty.'

'That's up to ye. Ye can donate them, if ye'd rather.'

'Har har har har. . . .'

'Har har yourself.'

'Are ye havin' me on, now?'

'Not foolish enough to attempt to cod a protected dispenser of spiritual necessities. You pour the liquor an' I'll put down the cash, *mo buacail óg*. An' good stuff, mind ye! I have a true feeling for decent whiskey.'

'All good sthuff here.'

'If ye didn't praise it, who would?'

He resembles a Valentino well past prime, slicked black hair and some sideburn, pointed narrow Spanish face: not a bad fellow, his eyes, like all Irish eyes, stained with a dumb hopelessness: strange that eyes should betray hopelessness in such a soul-safe nation.

He measures the drinks and carries them back but keeps his white clean hand close to them until Simon pushes a pound across. He looks at the note, frapping it several times.

'Don't tear it—there's not that many of 'em around.'

'Har har har har. . . .'

'Ye are busy?'

'No, didn't think so.' Glancing around the empty bar.

'Well, ye are. It's crowded in here, man! Refugees in long grey coats.'

'Oh.'

'Aye. They drink the smell of liquor—ye can't charge 'em

for smellin' it, avic. Oul men an' women, ghost grey, the miserable denizens of dear Dublin. Some folk drink to see 'em. I drink not to see them . . . *sláinte*. *Sláinte* to ye all.'

Sláinte . . . automatically, frowning and gazing about, looking at Simon and shrugging as he turns to make change, sucking the coins out of the rococo till with his right hand and slapping them into his left palm.

Simon drinks the first whiskey slowly, savouring it with a shudder, washing it down with half the bitter bass.

'It is a very indifferent whiskey.'

'Best in t'house!'

'May God help the man who has to put up with your worst. Were I not so desperate I'd pour it on the bar so ye could sop it up in that dishclout where it belongs. But tell me, is there any place here where I can buy eels?'

'Eels? Not that I've heard af.'

'*Sláinte*.' Simon makes one mouthful of the second glass. Swiftly, everything becomes subnormal. Good, bad or poison, whiskey always worked. It would be terrible if it ever ceased to work. If it did, he would have to live in manless places where no violence⁶ had been done.

'Peace is only a nice word for laziness, my friend.'

'Oh. . . Well, now.' He watches curiously as Simon carefully pours a little water from an ewer over the can's holed lid.

'It's a small relic I have from a pilgrimage to Patrick's Purgatory.'

'Ye don't say?'

'To think that heaven is an upstairs doss-house is utter blasphemy. Ye see, there are two roads to immortality—actually, it's the same road on opposite sides. But by nature, we always took the low road. That is a very concentrated diagnosis of our present disease. Against our true inclination, we're being forced along the wrong road. Our violence is only the nervous bark of the chained dog. In the

evening of our long day of freedom, we were able to save western civilization from paganism, even tho' we were only a loose collection of small tribes an' not a nation at all.'

'Agh, it's all this terrible materialism.'

'What hell are ye selling this stuff for if ye don't want to be a materialist? What's wrong with materialism, anyway?'

'They say it's even worse than Communism.'

'Don't make the elementary mistake, my friend, that a materialist is not one because he denies materialism. Anyway materialism's only dangerous when it claims its small part as the whole. Without the freedom of materialism in these times we'd only be typewriters operated by ghosts.'

'Har har har har. . . .'

'I'll tell ye something which may help ye respect materialism.'

'Yeh . . . ?'

'Human consciousness an' the evolution of the world are quite inseparable an' we'll never make an ounce of progress so long as we allow them to be artificially separated. If Darwin could have realized that, the sun wouldn't have been setting on the British Empire.'

'Have sense, man! If Buckingham Palace had a Cardinal Secretary ye'd be eating your spuds off Union Jacks.'

'What church do ye belong to?'

'The world, evolution the ritual, an' man the celebrant.'

'Oh . . . ?'

'All soul an' no spirit makes Pat the dull bhoys.'

'Har har har har. . . .'

'That's one reason why ye have so many customers. Tell me, is there any place in this town where I could find an island of sweetness an' peace.'

'Why not thry the churches, now?'

'Och, man, they're full of murther! Mithraism with a poor human bull—terrible. We are running away from ourselves to our home-made idea of God—religion by mere

inference, no longer by experience. I prefer the hallucinations in your bottles pro tem. But I'm grateful ye have talked with me.'

'Passes the time. . . .'

'Haven't talked with anyone like this for months. I've been living in a fool's paradise—never realizing how far things have gone. But these are owl thoughts. It's only the sound of the whiskey sinking down through them. I'm almost a normal Irishman. Just slip me another half-un to finish the good work.'

'Har har har har. . . .'

'There's Healy, dammit. Ho, Magnus . . . wait!'

Gone . . . home swiftly to the autumn lakes without me. If I hadn't wasted time with Valentino: three seconds—ten yards. What's it say . . . I've wasted time an' now will time waste me, twenty-four long hours of it. . . .

He looks around the hard-faced houses, every house a basilisk with insect's myriad eyes and every door a maw; iron maidens within, lead porage plumping in witches' pots. *Don't panic, Simon. There may be other gombeen lorries going home. . . .*

Two more whiskeys to blind the long sight and the city grows warmer, kindlier, its strident anonymity less hostile, each man potentially honest until proved different; each girl a virgin, each matron chaste—until proved different. The North Wall, the tied boats moving gently to the long rhythm of the sea, winch-clack, squeaking hawsers, odours of tar, ozone and fresh packing-cases, clean boards wearing the slow sun-rune. Corran? No . . . couple here t's'morning. Gone, now. Slap-slap the sardonic water-chuckle: cry, cry the cynical gulls, snowing upon a fore-castle as a sailor throws out a pail of slops. Ye'll surely get a lift if ye go out the ro-ad. Thanks, never thought of that. . . .

Didn't want to think of it. Don't want to go yet. Always a score of excuses and only one real reason. Tamar.

He shudders at the immensity of the problem he is going

to accommodate within his life. He could be taking her out of the parish stocks to tie her to a whipping post.

I'll have to be very circumspect and yet, I'll have to be completely honest. Sins of fathers: few men, no matter how strong, an' I'm not strong, can wholly overcome the residuals in their environment. The attempt must be made alone. I can brother Tamar, nurse her, even sleep with her, but I can't husband her an' if she is heart-tied to the idea of me, all I might ever do or say would be an empty irritation only. I want me sod hut an' dammit, I can't have it now with Tamar suffering the far side of the country, whether she wants to live in it or not. An', I guess, I'd also like to play the big feller to prove my own philosophy, using the girl's misfortune as a spanner, tightening the nuts on my own abstractions. I dunno . . . maybe I should have done it seven years ago instead of travelling thousands of miles looking for Whitman's ghost; witnessing men an' women killing themselves with fond frustrations—working, eating, marrying, breeding, dying by mere habit because they were all too un-create to imagine anything different, gombeen politicians encouraging pious ignorance so they could fix everything to suit themselves. I am able to give more'n many, but I'm not able to give everything an' what I retain is the measure of my unfreedom. I never did claim to be free—only that I'm progressing to freedom.

But the love of a lass is a fine thing.

Aye, that's so, but it's the white backside the whiskey's talking about. Love's not only an emotion. It's also a reality.

Love's not everything.

That it is not is our own fault. Never was the earth so large, free an' beautiful. Only, without humanity the good earth has no meaning whatsoever. Each man is his own sphinx, but instead of trying to answer himself, he just watches himself growing old and getting more cynical the further he moves away from the wonderland of youth,

teaching himself to nag the world to excuse his own bone laziness. Who the hell will believe ye?

Ye'd better stitch your lip in this third-hand Gomorrah.

I know that, too. But I can still plan to build a sod house.

Tamar may expect more'n a leaky roof.

That doesn't worry me. I'm worried that I'm still adolescent enough to distaste her shortage of fastidiousness. May God forgive me for I know there is no way to truth save by the long rough road of error. And what have I lost? Tamar could be a widow carrying a church wain. The bloody whiskey is thinking in me with the envious mind of this city. This dead city lives, after a fashion, on an afterthought balanced precariously between church an' pub, each institution quite indispensable to the other, and squeezing the state dry between them. In a few more years Ireland will be all but deserted. Dublin'll be full of parsons, priests, pimps, pansies, punks an' palavers.

Cities are much the same anywhere and this is your city.

Mine? Don't kid yourself! My city is a green lake in a quiet dawn, a native moment constant as the sky. I'm a patriot—not a bloody chauvinist. A patriot can go the world an' discuss the cultures of nations, but a pan-nationalist can only cower at home, biting his nails, a shotgun across his knees.

A word of advice: be content with nature. Keep to the fact of the earth and refuse to distort it.

There's no other way home—the world is the unfinished dream of man if he doesn't have a final nightmare. . . .

A strong hand clamps his shoulder. 'All right, mea culpa, I'll go quietly. . . .'

'Simon, me boy!' a loud voice rings his ear.

Davey Rea, once parishman, ex-rebel in the heather, now city plain-clothes sergeant. 'They said ye were back!' He is grinning all over his big and pleasant face. 'How the hell are ye?'

'Well, Davey, well . . . and ye?'

'Och, not too bad. Dammit, ye're lookin' well. Young as a laddo!'

'The only thing that's still young about me, Davey, is the laddo. I'm still waiting for him to get sense.'

'Why did ye come back at all? There is damn little here, man.'

'How far have ye moved in seven years so I can adjust meself? I've just been talking to meself an' ye may be wiser or more foolish than I am.'

'Ha ha ha ha . . . boy o boy, ye're still there, avic!'

'Davey, we're not even an original people any longer.'

'True enough! That little Welsh bastard Lloyd George pissed on our fire.'

'This is a terrible city, Davey. It keeps frightening me wits out. There are oul folk all round me—lost in a tideless sewer of shadow. Terrible to a fresh mind. Oh, I can see first hand why drink is drunk in this sad, sad land.'

'It's a wonder ye came back at all.'

'Well . . . I sort of woke up to find meself in a world cursed with an animal envy. Didn't like it. The survival of the shrewdest rat.'

'What makes ye think it's not the same here?'

'Maybe, but I can avoid it here. My life was growing untidy. I was sprouting a scaly tail—losing the eye of youth.'

'Ye can't live on the smell of youth!'

'Et tu Brute.'

'Well. . . ' He is very sensitive to any disagreement. Davey is still two men: officious copper and tender rebel leavened by the long lonely nights in the watching hills. Go with him, be kind. •

'Davey, avic, point me one man in this town who doesn't remorse on t'dear days beyant recall an' I'll believe ye.'

'Aye, something in that. Ye can't live on the past.'

'That's a fine thing to tell an Irishman.'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'What hell else are we all trying to do? There's hardly a western man alive who's not running after his youth—the wrong way: avoiding the responsibility of maturity.'

'The last I heard of ye, ye were livin' with Red Indians.'

'Aye, sort of, I couldn't stay—the sadness would have destroyed me. They knew all about asceticism, Davey, an' could put it to the uses of practical survival.'

'They're a wild lot be all account?'

'Hagh! Kettle calling pot blackass! They're like us—an oul bred race. The life-rune spent. The only difference is that we were cut off in flower whereas the Indian died of old age. The Indian at one time felt like the Druid. He knew the sun to be the original body of Christ. In his day he was a sweet man, living inside nature an' only incidentally upon her.'

'Himm. . . . It's a wonder ye never got married.'

'Never able to see meself as a married man.'

'Ha ha ha ha. What hell can?'

'Oh, many people, it seems. But I've a terrible hunch, married or single, that I'll be supping sorrow from now on. Pray God I have the patience to bear it. I'm still far too arrogant.'

'Ha ha ha. . . .'

'I have a shocking affliction—I can smell an' see untruth—in myself, too. All the horrible an' unnecessary complications men wallow in to avoid the single stark truth.'

'Conscience?'

'Och, what's conscience? Ask me mother if I'm a rogue. There *is* such a thing as conscience but it's buried under a weight of secular an' religious superstition. What *we* have is only the animal's conscience which only tells us what to fear. The real conscience suggests what we should love. Davey, all this oul stuff is only holding us back. From what? From the recognition of our blessed, impotent and lonely

ignorance. If we could only realize it, we're all now in the territory for which great men like Tom Aquinas had to fight and sweat. We've got so far unconsciously by the natural progress of evolution, but now we have to make it conscious or else your emptiness will annihilate all we have created.'

'Man alive, Simon, ye've gone a long way.'

'No, not at all. I'm only catching up.'

'My God, ye won't go down well here—either side of the Border.'

'Maybe not, but the world is wide. An' anyway, all I know is still in the head an' not in the heart. It is always hardest to make the heart an organ of forethought.'

'Maybe ye don't realize we've a tight censorship of thought here, well as the books?'

'That doesn't worry me. Gombeens everywhere favour censorships. Ye can't be burned for thinking, altho' the Church never did revoke the law of the brasero. Ye wouldn't like to buy a few eels, though?'

'Gagh! Wouldn't ate the damn things. Water snakes!'

'No . . . very ancient fish. Our forebears used to train them like seals.'

'What are ye doin' in the city?'

'Dunno. The crowds scare me.'

'Ha ha ha . . . but, ye know, I'm real glad to see ye.'

'An' I, ye. Ye are the first half-sane man I've met. Do ye know of any lorries going home?'

'Agh, time enough. I was up in Corran las' Easter. I wanted t'go this summer but the wife was on a Lough Derg. Do ye know?' He is whispering, looking over his shoulder. 'I had a woman at Easter—aye! At my age, Godstrewth!'

'Aye. . . .'

'First time in me married life I've ever had a free wan. I couldn't help meself. I was spinnin' for a pike in the Aoine an' she came along on her own—more or less asked me, begod.'

'Well . . . ?'

'God, Simon, I can see now why a married man shouldn't wander. A young girrl makes an oul wife seem very poor. Hough! I was like a young feller—me! She took it like a hero an' me sixteen stone. She said her name was. . . .'

'Don't tell me.'

'Why? Are ye offended at me?'

'No . . . but free women should be nameless, Davey.'

'Ye might know her yourself.'

'I might . . . might not.'

'Oh. . . .' He is checked again and shy, looking through his mind for a disguising topic. 'What happened between your father an' yourself?'

'That's old news, Davey. The parish has hanged an' quartered it long ago.'

'They said ye took money off him?'

'No . . . he gave me money. He wanted to give me the whole farm. Although I never got on with him, he was potentially a good sort of man. I can see him now as a man altho' I never cōuld as a parent. Now that I no longer need him, he is a reasonable individual, according to his taper. We always hurt ourselves by asking others for something they're unable to give.'

'Your father's a good man, Simon. He hid me for a week in the oul days—t'time I was wounded at t'burnin' of the big house. He could'a been shot for it an' he had no agreement with my politics. By God, he allus thought a lot of ye.'

'We could only manage to say the wrong things to each other at the wrong times. Unwittingly, he cursed my childhood with a sort of fear, using his authority either as a goad or a stick. I'm grateful for that now. When I was ten or so I used to pray long sleepless prayers that the home would stay together till I had no more need for it. When my mother died I didn't expect to come home to a home. But I'm not complaining. I was a man at seven with most of a man's

experiences behind me and I knew I was just waiting for my body to catch up.'

'What happened at Corran?'

'Oh, little. When I went away the sister took over an' got married. When I reappeared they were scared in case the ole man changed his mind. They promoted me to a full an' happy exile in me own land.'

'It was a good farm. . . .'

'No better and much less peaceful than many another. Bad blood is not unequal to bloodshed as ye well know.'

'Aye, true enough.'

'Join me in a haler?'

'No . . . not now, thanks. I'm on duty. Look—I'll see ye this evenin'—eh?'

'If I'm not on me long way home.'

'No—stay the night. I'll put ye up. Be at the bus stop opposite McBirney's at about seven. We'll have a few. I haven't had a night in five year. . . .'

He squeezes a shoulder and slings away, darting his head about with a quick copper glance; wild rebel turned tame by a job and a holy wife who spends as much time scrubbing his heretic soul as she does washing the children. Davey darning his own socks to give her more time with the *sagart a rún*.

'Give me a reasonable Irish malt at the double, if ye please, with a baby bass to hunt it home. No, no water. The taste is unpleasant enough without lengthenin' it. I've no affection at all for alcohol. Thank you. *Sláinte!*'

'Give me a glass of whiskey, please . . . *Sláinte.*'

'Half Irish, please . . . *Sláinte!*'

This is getting bloody silly an' expensive. Might as well be drinking water. *Change Ophion's water*. Lively as a starving flea. . . .

'I'm in town for the day, God save me. I'm Irish born, unmarried and tolerably uncommitted.'

‘Har har har. . . .’

Simon eyed him. A fishmonger, Doyle his name-sign, small silver scales sticking to the hairs on his thin arms and all of him smelling like fish. The dead fish on his slabs are beautiful, lights gleaming on their enamelled flanks, dream forms ghosting in green pools, death itself powerless to annul them, their cold chaste life a sort of undying. Doyle takes Simon for a pure-born tinker which is flattering since tinkers have little breeding.

‘Eels? No—no sale at all for thim.’

‘I’m glad. Too royal a fish for low Irish gullets. Thank ye for confirming my expectations, Mister Doyle.’

Doyle is curious.

‘Ye buy me eels an’ I’ll tell ye how me grandfather did his courting.’

‘Ha ha ha . . . never saw wan.’

‘Well, to lessen your natural ignorance, here is one.’

‘My God, a snake it is!’

‘No, an eel—a tame wan—Ophion be name.’

‘An’ how do ye catch thim, now?’

‘Well, that’s a long story.’

‘If ye have the time . . .?’

‘No one has any time. These eels are a peculiar but highly intelligent fish. They came to Ireland around the year fifteen thousan’ B.C., just before the Danaans when our twelve mountains were pokin’ through the waves. That was a cold spell, snow an’ sleet everywhere. But to make it short, when Patrick was doin’ his bit of cursin’, the eels slipped into the water an’ escaped total banishment. Wance a mont’ on the day of the full moon, out they come to gorge themselves on slugs. They whistle across the field to each other an’ ye have to learn t’imitate thim an’ then they all gather roun’ like flies roun’ a light. Do ye follow me, now?’

‘Aye.’

‘Well, ye have to have a big wet sack in the left han’ an’ a noose af strong string in the right, the sack a quarter full

of ass's guts—must be the guts of an ass. The on'y other guts they do go for belong to the platypus but that's a scarce animal in our part. They scint the guts an' dive in't sack, whistlin' like hell to the others in the water. When ye think ye have sufficient, ye just slip the string roun' the neck of the sack.'

'Janey, but they're a quare fish, now! An' do they bite?'

'Bite? Terrible. . . .'

'Ticht-ticht.'

'There wus a fellow wance at home havin' a quiet pumpship an' a big wan jumps up at him.'

'Ye doan't say, now?'

'Indade, I do say it.'

'Well, now!'

'They called him "Fishfork" ever since.'

'Fishfork?'

'Aye.'

'Fishfork . . . oh, fishfork! Aye, Fishfork, ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Ha ha ha—ye laugh only from the teeth.'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'I could tell ye eely stories that'd make ye weep. How they fare forth for love an' death . . . remembering the green sea's foreclosure on Tír na Óg, which we have forgotten. Easy to laugh . . . our Bible is written into the grey sorrows of the wind. . . . Two small Irishmen, please. Set them up opposite ends of the bar so I can get some exercise between nourishment.'

At last the whiskey is taking control of his brain; wonderful that common courage is so accessible and so reasonably priced, now; brave men used to have to bite their tongues for courage. Pubs are charitable institutions with gallons of fortitude in their cellars, raw red courage fit for rebellions and wars: O *sassanač*, lie down wid croppy boy. A year in gaol in every golden bottle—distillers should have the pharaonic uraeus branded on their foreheads, their names in the Book of the Living Dead.

Whistling the *Shan Van Vocht* as a suitable air for the occasion, all hard corners now gentle curves, all men apostolic and all women kind and content, Simon started to think that he might begin again to exist in a city provided there was sufficient money for sufficient whiskey, a double about every hour, his mind in mud like a tided boat; swearing by yan an' be yin an' bejabers, laughing the ha ha ha, a mass a week and a confession once a month to keep the soul intact even though the body was in tatters and the spirit staggering down the steeps of hell.

O Christ little brother, new Osiris, give me the quiet faith of a grain of corn in cold spring earth to save me against dying out of due time, for I could lie in shadows and betray my day. . . .

Amiens Street Station. *Water Ophion.*

T'th'Curragh af Kildare
T'bhoys will thin repair
An' Lard Edward will be there. . . .

'That is fine air, now!'

'There is no air in the shadow country, father.'

'Aye, a fine tune!'

'Ninety-eight has come and gone, father.'

'Aye . . . aye . . . so has Sixteen. So has Twinty-two.'

He is a fierce-eyed old man, dreaming over a quid of tobacco pouched in a lax cheek. . . . The oul Shan Van Vocht! he grins, jutting out a slobbered stubbled chin.

'Where is she now, father?'

'Aye . . . dead, me son, dead . . . ' he mutters with a sad shake of his head. 'We broke hur h'art—ilse dhrowned it in holy wather. Dunno which. Och, it's cruel to be hilpless an' oul.'

'And how old are ye, father, forby your long memory?'

'Past nointy, Iyam, avic, past nointy.'

'And what is your answer, O man of nointy?'

Simon asks gently, looking into his fuddled eyes.

'I've none . . . none,' the word falling shamed and stone-heavy by his feet.

An engine toots impatiently in the station.

'That's me train.'

'When's it going?'

'Och, any toime now, avic. I won't miss it. Lissen? They do be callin' for me, now. . . .'

Down the poor street where children are playing and dead-eyed people brood there comes a long low call: *Come home, John Costello, come home. . . .*

'Ye hear?'

'Yes.'

'That is for me—took me a long time to hear it.'

Come home, come home John Costello. . . . The soft insistent voice urged again.

'Well, I must go, now, me son. God save ye.'

He reaches out a grave weighted hand to Simon's shoulder, the finger joints knotted with rheumatism, the blue thumb-nail chipped like an old cup, whispering: 'God save ye. . . . No soil here now for the young strong root. Go ye to the mountains where the rivers rise.'

The hand falls down and he turns away, going slowly up the street. . . . *Come home, come home.*

'Aye, aye—I'm comin'!'

He does not fall suddenly. He collapses very slowly, kneeling down on the pavement as if to pray there and then gently rolling over. . . .

'Begod, he's dead!'

'He's dead'

'Dead! Dead! Dead . . . git the priest!'

'Quick—the priest. . . .'

The people brood busily on death, now. The playing children come in a solemn processional line along the pavement. The crowd gathers to see death.

'What's wrong here?' A huge D.M.P. wades through the throng.

'T'oul man's dead!

'No. Gone home,' said Simon.

'Who is he?'

'Who was he . . .?'

'Yes, Ireland shall be free,
From the centre to the sea;
Then hurra for Liberty!
Says the Shan Van Vocht . . .'

sang Simon, leaving the crowd behind.

HAIRCUT—he is ashamed of his appearance in his own whiskey-clear eyes. Whiskey makes the man a bourgeois. Whiskey an' tradition are two spent matches in a box trying to keep each other warm.

He sees the word, Hairdresser, over a shop, the window hazed with cream-pleated cheesecloth: no pole. . . . He stares at the quiet shop for several minutes, not thinking, trying to fish his thoughts out of the whiskey, waiting for something to drop into his mind. The song comes again, believe me if all. . . . But the citizens are beginning to look back at him over curious shoulders. Come in t'evenin' or come in t'marnin', come whin ye're looked for or come widout warnin'. . . . He pushes through a chromium-framed glass door with muslin curtains into a hexagonal lobby; vaseline-thick air with strong synthetic perfumes that deposit their original tar on the back of the tongue, mixed with stale odours of roasted hair; worn mauve carpet, off-white walls lit by two bracket-lights behind ornate pink plastic fans; two occasional chairs in chromium with grey-green mock-leather seats and backs and a glass-faced confessional of a cash desk like an empty coffin . . . mea culpa.

Wrong sort of place—Salon de Beauté—bewty an' t'baste. Silkskin leg an' false breast, Lord save me. But I suppose the customers are always right. In old Egypt this would be a funeral parlour. O when I think of all the clean-skinned girls I've known, nothing over their proud flesh but a shift and a dress, the sweet plain smell of human skin, good breasts falling soft and free, round belly and noble hip. . . .

While knowing he should get out, he sits on a chair and rests his feet. There is a pain in the knuckles of his heels with knocking so long on the pavements. Odd: women come here ostensibly to improve appearances. If they weren't so scornful of it the pansy designers could go the whole pig

and make a louvre in the skirt instead of beating about the bush. It's crazy: swaddled nuns one end and demi-mondes the other, and all after the good life. . . .

As he draws a deep breath a few of the red-mouthed ladies peer round the curtained doorway, pushing out their busts. He makes a rude sign at them and they withdraw, tittering.

Easy, Simon . . . stop thinking about boudoirs. It's the gasleak smells . . . I mind in the rain-grey evenings taking my mother's herb sachet into the big wardrobe and closing the squeaking door, sitting down under the hanging dresses and smelling the perfumes, till I saw the sun on a wide and slow river, trees flowering to the water's edge. . . .

A feline red-nailed talon hooks back the edge of the velvet curtain, revealing a dark Jewish woman, the curtain robing her body as though she wore an oriental gown. She looks at him warily under high narrow eyebrows, the originals erased.

'I—I wanted me hair cut,' he mutters, holding out a wadge of hair above his ear to prove his point, looking at her shoes, her small feet pressed into them so the flesh is silk-sausaged across the arches. He thinks feet like that, so neat in themselves, should have nice natural lambskin sandals or else be bare and brown; a bare woman's foot on soft earth is a comely thing; the rounded body of a woman resting on soft earth is a comely thing, the big hips fined to the narrow waist. . . .

'Why—you're Simon Green!'

'Yeh, that's right,' he whispers, slowly raising his eyes across her.

'Don't you remember me?'

He looks shyly and sees in the brown eyes a young, unbroken girl lying under a sun-wet birch, playing with a flower and innocently boasting her beauty. Lithe as a fawn with rock-hard breasts and his body rich with the compassion of desire when he had loved and loved her better than dream and had tenderly and freely translated all dream for

her by the unfallen summer lakes. He had never kissed her, nor touched any part of her: no need, their contact was an invocation, not provocation; plenty of other coarse-country heifers to paw and grunt upon, who didn't give a straw for worship: not this young Israeless with her mystery of a long and noble race.

'You have hardly changed!'

He could not say she had not changed and it would be unfair to call her change to count, and cruel to match her now against an old appearance; perhaps her mind still held its roots in childhood, and flowered on. 'Miriam.'

She nods, smiling, raking her red-thickened lips off the small white pink-stained teeth and, seeing his eyes on her mouth, closes it. . . . 'Miriam Bergman. I was thinking about ye today. Ye never used to make up . . . but no, ye haven't changed. Time and you have no power to change on me. I couldn't tell ye then but I used to lie awake at night in my bed and try to weep away the sickness of my love for you. No . . . not pup love. Full awful lost man-love.'

'My brother said you were back.' She is embarrassed.

'No—please don't be embarrassed!' he pleads anxiously. 'You used never to be embarrassed. Remember . . . you sat with me on the shore drying yourself in the sun an' explaining your freedom by saying I never made you afraid—an' now, a couple of cold words across a room. . . .'

'I was only a child.'

'My God, yes! I know. . . . Why grow up unfree?'

'I can't get over it! Did you know I was here?'

'No—wanted a haircut,' he mutters sadly, feeling her pick up his words with forced finger and thumb and drop them out on the street. Haircut . . . for the Philistines.

'You did know I was here?'

'No, in Dublin. I—I seem to be collecting leftovers. I've a hunch that this day could be the last one in my wildoat youth. Oh, I've had a good run. . . .'

'You look exactly the same—exactly.'

'Not quite so crackers. Maybe more crackers—depends—how ye see it.'

She takes in his shabbiness, growing doubtful. Sadly, he says: 'And yet ye say I haven't changed. . . . Why judge me if I haven't? I know for sure a large part of me hasn't changed, thank God, and there ye have the reason for my poor appearance. Your business is just about mine's—dead opposite.'

'I don't understand . . .?'

'You take my appearance as a sign of downward change. I say no. Unchangedly, I love ye still, lying there in a forgotten boat and I, not lusting, loving and loving an' scared that lust would spoil my loving . . . oh, Jesus, Miriam, the memory of ye still! My own mind a whole warm easy thing an' anxiously content . . . and you've not asked to kiss me.'

'But, Simon, that was long ago.'

'Long . . . not long—yesterday. I was born the day before yesterday.'

'I was completely unawakened, Simon,' she protests. 'I—I hardly remember.'

'We could have different ideas about waking an' sleeping. Now ye sleep, dreamin'g with clenched fists, eyes fearing assault. Had I known ye were here, I'd have called, anyway. Ye say I haven't changed—well, I have.'

'How?' quizzically, coldly.

'A little more free.'

'You were always wild.'

'Sure. All strong colts are wild—the quiet ones are sick or guilty. But there always comes a time when a man must decide between recklessness and freedom.'

'What are you now?'

'Oh, reckless still but only because I don't know the art of freedom well enough yet.'

'Himph. . . .'

'Ye can't hear me now.'

'Oh, yes, I can.'

'I'm only trying, I suppose, to touch the time when ye say ye were unawakened—only I will go wide-eyed, aware an' awake. I will be full of fear because youth lives in haunted places as the poet tried to say. Not over the wall, Miriam, through the door. I've never let the door slam shut an' I've watched the rest of 'em feeling over the wall, calculating, measuring, finagling, fighting an' praying . . . no, not for me. Idols have ruinous appetites.'

'But Simon. . . .'

'Yeh, I know—laws an' orders—privilege an' potatoes. What the hell use law an' order if they're going to strait-jacket a man? Miriam, you're letting life drive ye into suspicion an' nervous self-defence which is only one remove from all the green envy an' suspicion in this hogtied land.'

'Didn't you like America?'

'Sure—sure, I did. I found the America most Yankees no longer believe in.'

'Why did you come back?'

'Didn't have to stay there any longer. Decided I should move.'

'Oh . . . ?' She has scarcely moved herself the whole time, still half clad by the curtain, speaking out of her mouth and head, and there was a time when she could not say a word without leaping, the sound of life was so glad to her.

'Why did you go to America at all?'

'I went to find Whitman.'

'And did you?'

'Yes, I did. But he wasn't in the States any more'n Dante is in Italy or Goethe in Germany. He was in me. I arrived at that conclusion in the town of Huntington. I had been chasing a ghost—a right hearty one, but a ghost.'

'Oh . . . ? I do remember you reading me Whitman.'

'My mother gave him to me for some strange reason—my God, *Leaves of Grass* on a small Irish farm! He hasn't been found yet—but then, neither has Goethe nor that fellow called Shakespeare, nor even your own David. But godsake,

don't get me entirely wrong. I'm not all that different to the youth ye knew.'

She smiles deeply, secretively: 'You've gone a long way!'

'No—no . . .!' he denies, shaking his head against her smile. 'I'm only a five-eighth Paddy with a few ideas on the nether side of starvation because I'm too damned stubborn to create a sham inwardness. I'm a not-yet man, like all the rest.'

'Oh, I'm not so sure. . . .'

'Miriam, you were in my life for only six short summer weeks but ye helped me round a corner an' put a human seal on my pagan dream of beauty. I mayn't have had much effect on ye—funny! The active strutting male is much less potent than the passive female. But you're one of the big items in my ledger, Miriam. A sort of catalyst. I learned through you to recognize the idealism of love over all the lust in Erin go Brá.'

She keeps smiling wisely; rain on a tight roof. She knows a damnsight better—living, working in a hospital for tired faces and uncurled hair, readying old Cleopatras for their dirty Caesars, inured to acrid scents, making a living in a cultus her good patriarchs described as harlotry. . . .

'You used to be smart and proud of your appearance.'

'Yeh—young roosters like bright feathers. But don't judge me. This hick town's not the world although it is sometimes very like the world. I know ye can smell the holy water on me wind an' ye'll name me yahoo like all the others—please don't. The liquor doesn't mean anything.'

She listens, unlistening, unable to understand he is trying to protect the earlier dream. But she offers no aid, not even remembering that trees, water, sun and a terraced strand were beautiful.

'You're in the wrong job, Miriam.'

'Oh . . .?'

'Had the world been free to us by better licence, I'd have

• made a soft skin tent of many colours for ye. Ye've no right to ask me to recognize ye on the terms of your own frustrations. In your young unwisdom ye had a fearless affection for me—remember that. All these silly dirty things around us are quite untrue.'

She begins to colour, thinking he may be mocking.

'Miriam . . .' he whispers miserably. 'I'm not trying to sell ye anything. Hail, farewell an' never farewell. Don't mistake me—I'm no wispy dreamer. I'm hard as nails.'

'But, Simon, your mind's like a torrent.' You can't expect me . . .' she shrugs. She is wooden. She looks sideways at her pink perfect oval nails on the curtain, commenting objectively: 'You're still very attractive.'

'What have me looks to do with it?'

'Wonder you haven't married—or have you?'

'No . . . no one has ever taken me seriously.'

She laughs: 'That's understandable.'

'Yeh, guess so. I don't shape like a provider. But I am getting married . . . I think.'

'You think?'

'Yeh . . . I don't think I could marry just to cut a woman out of the herd for myself. I'd always be apologetic, thinking she could have found a better guy. It's odd that I meet you again at this time, except there's no such thing as accident.'

'Why?'

'Well . . . I might have married this woman an' never wandered, but at that time ye were the only female I could see. Guess my mind is all one-way.'

'But you were too young to marry then, Simon. You were barely eighteen.'

'Och, that's me eye! If a man's fit to beget, he's fit to marry. When a girl is filled out she's ready to be a wife an' mother.'

'Young people just don't know enough. . . .'

'No? Saving some acquired guile, what do you know more'n ye did seven year ago? The hot unprejudiced love of

youth is far better than the roué's experience. Victorian sentimentality has blighted more lives than a war.'

'When are you getting married?'

'Dunno—soon as possible. Beat the baby. . . .'

'Oh, Simon. . . .'

'Och, not mine.'

'You're fooling?'

'Ha, I may well be.'

'I—I hope you'll be happy.'

'Don't expect to be. I've passed the stage of expecting any person, including myself, to provide happiness.'

She wears no marriage ring. She is only twenty-one. She will probably make a made marriage within her race, for love of race, whether she loves or not. . . . 'Are ye a virgin?'

'Well!'

'Tell me.'

'Really. . . .'

'Oh, I'm not personally curious—not dirty curious.'

Silence.

'Okay, you too.'

'I am, if it makes the slightest difference. But you've no right. . . .'

'Right? I claim none. But thank you. Could you do me a favour?'

'Well . . .?' she frowns, not knowing what to expect.

'Could ye just empty the water out of this can an' fill it with fresh. Ophion can't live in stale water.'

'What is it?'

'An eel—an unclean fish for you since it has no scales. Me soul in an oul tin can. . . .'

'Ugh. What on earth are you carrying it about for?'

'Well, it started as a sort of sample—now it's a sort of charm. Wish I knew why Moses objected to it. It was a high ritual fish, once.'

She laughs, holding out her hand for the can, still standing between the curtains. They do not fall behind her until he

sees she has put on weight; lakeland fawn into fattening doe. But beautiful, still—the brown Jew-sad eyes; sadness—not hopelessness, like the Irish eye; wise waiting eyes: the same eyes that had seen the summer lakes. The lakes had autumn now; trees moulting, leaves drifting into rafts among the snapped stumps of the reeds, the mind a loneliness.

Squawk!

Ophion is out—down the bloody drain into the reeking guts of dirty Dublin. ‘Don’t let him down the hole for Godsake!’

‘Can’t—there’s a thing there. . . .’

‘Thank God. Has it not the lovely form? That living line an’ the maned tail.’

She stands beside him, her soft arm against his hard one: the woman-smell, the strong hair in a stylish bun, the small close ears and the faint oriental prunja on the skin. O swiftly could he love her, the girl in the woman; give life as seed to an old love that is almost desireless. . . . Oh, Miriam. . . . It is not his own desire he has. It is her desire.

‘Are you sure it is a fish?’

‘Sure.’

‘It’s frightfully slimy. I couldn’t hold it. . . .’ She twitches her glued fingers.

‘So’s love.’

‘Why don’t you let the poor thing go?’

‘Can’t yet. Daren’t. Not sure why. Let me love ye?’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘You are full of love.’

She gazes a long time at the slim eel sliding round the angles of the white sink, a seeking defeatless thing.

‘No’, she whispers, more to herself, shuddering a little as she shakes her head.

He is relieved: possession now would be no more than mechanical desire. He did not love her for physical possession, which would only end his possession of a good dream. She had long ago given him an immaculate possession, conceived

within the transcendent rune of youth in a new summer made thrice as new by the high endeavour of a seeking heart.

‘Kiss me, then, an’ tell me where I can find a barber.’

She leans forward, saying he is really quite crazy, holding his body away with her two hands and kissing him lightly on the lips. He tastes the metallic lipstick.

‘Love crazy, Miriam. A crazy thing in this love-lost world.’

‘There’s a barber just round the corner. . . .’

Barber round the corner: barber round the bend. . . . O Christ, little brother, I’m scared. We should be starting now to play the body as a fine instrument, the world our own, but the tail still wags the rat. . . .

Stale hair oil: barber keeping in trim by shaving himself; white-faced aborigine, mesmerizing himself. . . . ‘Wit ye in a minut, sur.’

‘I can wait here all day, my friend.’

‘Har har har. . . . Comin’ now, sur!’

‘No hurry.’

Shaving’s an odd thing. Prehistoric man had a beard all over an’ Egyptian priests shaved every hair on their bodies. . . . Wouldn’t mind a beard if it didn’t make me so noticeable. Mother’s father had a fine fiery beard—never saw his face. Good man, he was, always quoting Psalm 37 against gossipers: be not inflamed against evil doers nor over zealous against the workers of iniquity, with the exception of preachers an’ policemen. . . .

The tame starling—God, I was only two. He used to hide it under his chin and let it fly out for me and I climbed on his trunks of knees and raked through the stiff red hair, looking for the nest. What? No eggs! She was cackling this mornin’, avic. The starling used to sit on the bench and sing the clangours of his anvil. A cat caught it and he wept but didn’t curse the cat. He died in agony for seven days and

refused drugs, whispering in sweat: Oh, Lord Christ, let it not be too long. . . .

Slick skinny man with a long bill-hook tight-skinned face, long-fingered hands, washerwoman soft. 'Now, sur.' He has a slightly clubbed foot like Byron and the devil. My God, is that me? Sunburned potato with dormant eyes. . . .

'Your sheet is smelly.'

'Wha. . . .'

'I'm not that particular but one of the few things I'm allergic to is a rancid face-flannel.'

'It's quite clane, sur. Fresh last customer.'

'If ye hang that round me neck, I'll be sick. . . .'

'Wate, I'll change it.'

'Plenty off, no extras, no shampoos, singes, waves, oils or natter: hair cut!'

'Yis, sur.'

'Just say yis. Me father was a gipsy, name of Ariel Corn-stack. He was a swallower of unbelieveables by profession an' taught me to throw knives. I've done the pilgrimage on me bare knees. That's about all.'

'Yis, sur, ha ha ha ha. . . .'

Oh, God, the poor face in the mirror alongside my face, two monkeys in a cage of silent glass: the pure human concentration cutting my bloody hair, tender, skilful hands of man. 'I'm sorry I was so rude.'

'Och, that's all right, sur.'

Time never reneges but minds fornicate. Life by learned and dislearned men is held to be little more'n a lonely candle in a draughty corridor waiting for the moment of death.

Shouldn't have talked to Miriam like that—strong ideas always stir the azoic female: women still see whole, life and love synonymous; men dissect and diagnose the parts; men see stars, women the totality of the night.

Snip snip snip . . . the man's gentle ghost-hands. He keeps thinking, thinking. . . . 'Tell me, friend: do ye know anything about eugenics?'

'Oh aye! That's me hobby.'

'Well, now?'

'Only thing that'll save the world.' Snip snip snip . . . his grey electroplated eyes snipping the bridge of his nose.

'Oh . . .?'

'Aye! Lay down the law. Castrate all the bastards ye don't want—male an' female.' Snip snip snip. He holds up a wadge of tobacco hair and snips it off, shaking the scissors at his own and Simon's reflection in the watching mirror. He has the barber's habit of talking to mirrors, the eyes jumping back and forth over the toilet basin.

'What sort of bastards?'

Snip snip snip, another scrotum cut clean off. 'Well take this country. It's run be bleddy Jews an' Masons.'

'They're very welcome. But I thought the Church was the jarvey?'

'Naw . . .! The Church is above politics.'

'Yeh, guess so—right on top of them.'

'The time is comin' when food an' breedin' will have to be properly organized.'

'How?'

'Well, a man doesn't keep more cows than he has hay for.'

'Okay. . . .'

'Well—vet all marriages, select the fittest, cut all the weeds an' control the birth-rate.'

'The Church doesn't fancy birth control or eunuchs.'

'I know, but she needn't worry. She can still have her pick. The Church an' the world can't afford so many drones. In another fifty year the grub'll be short. We'll have t'control the population with the knife.'

'Herod innocents. . . .'

'Wha?'

'Snatch babies?'

'Adjustments can be made, here an' there. We jus' don't need all these people. Machines'll soon be doin' half the

work. No point starvin' the whole world just because people like to buck—t'hell wid that.'

'You've far more logic than I have.'

'Aye . . . we must be logical about it!'

'But somehow, logic can't provide new ideas.'

'We don't want any more new ideas—bother enough wid the ones we have.'

'Yeh! But life seemes to want to be more'n repetition. Old laws an' traditions wear out like any other tools. But how do ye manage to agree all this with your faith?'

'No trouble! The faithful can starve like anywan else.'

'Boy, I'm a better Catholic than ye are.'

'Why so?'

'I believe that if a man's truly faithful, he'll never starve. If we knew how to ate one mouthful of bread properly it would feed us for a week.'

'Try it!'

'I have.'

'Oh . . .?'

'I lived for twelve days on water an' a crust of bread in mountains, my friend, an' I came ~~down~~ a fitter an' healthier man than I was before.'

'Ye'll have a helluva job gettin' the people of this or any other country up into mountains wid a crust!'

'Yeh, guess so. . . . I think you're half right, but only half. Many of the big gombeens have been thinking like this for years. They're acting under the expectation of fear, just as animals exist in a world of perpetual fear. Irresponsibility can go on creating irresponsibilities till we're all back on our knees again, clawing in cold earth for a sour root.'

'That's just what I'm sayin'!'

'I know. I can't argue with ye. I'll agree with ye if ye can prove that man is only a shrewd an' crafty animal.'

'Agh, that's not important!'

'I can't help thinking it is. A feller once proved that the hop was in the frog's hind legs because the frog didn't hop

when the legs were cut off. That'd be a sorry way to prove that life is greater than starvation.'

'Ha ha ha ha—ye'll see.'

'Oh, I'll see anyway, one way or the other. I can't agree that we've survived so far just because we're animals. I think but can't prove that we've survived because we're not entirely animals. When a cow tells me she wants kale next week instead of hay an' that she'd like the young red bull instead of the old black one, I'll come back an' ask ye to instruct me how to use the knife.'

'Ha ha ha ha.' Snip snip snip.

'Tell me, are ye married?'

'No bleddy fear!'

'Why not?'

'An' start breedin' more kids?'

'Ye don't have to have a family.'

'The Church doesn't agree wid that.'

'But where the hell are ye, then?'

'A man must try an' protect his immortal soul.'

'But what about the two-legged animals ye're plannin' to geld?'

'I'm talkin' about the future. There'll be a dispensation for it whin the time comes—the ool Faith allus does the right thing at the right time.'

'Well, that settles everything. . . .'

'Ha ha ha. . . .' The tenor laugh, the sexless-soft fingers.

'How's that, sur?' Etiolated neck—back of the man I never normally see. . . . The sightless head staring down the dead past.

Strop strop strop . . . the naked razor: hold on to me pair, apart from procreation an' world famine I need them for thinking, the power that seeds the babies dreams the new dream.

'There ye are, sur!'

Whiff whiff whiff the besom. 'Tell me, do ye ever dream?'

'Aye, I do—I keep havin' the wan sort of dream. A tall

woman comes int' the room an' stands there laughin' at me. Sometimes I think she's me mother, God rest her soul. . . .'

'Three half-uns, one behind the other, instead of a bed this night, if ye please.'

'Yis, sur.'

'And put a drop of mint in each to kill the taste.'

'Yis, sur.'

'Nature is dying—finished. We'll go with her in another few thousand years if we're not very careful.'

'Yis, sur.'

'I propose that man emancipates himself from all physical and moral compulsion, inside and outside, an' live again with all his experiences within the healing universal idea.'

'Me brother's a priest. I've often heard him talkin' like this.'

'He'd be burned alive if he talked like this. The mind conceives in time an' the eye perceives in space an' thinking drops the keystone into place in the arch of heaven. Imagine! Thinking is a bit of God!'

'I've never heard me brother mention that wan, but thin he often uses the Latin for t'dangerous bits. He's in Rome now. I sind him a few bob now an' again. He's a smart feller—dead sharp. . . .'

'Without the concept, exact science as a cult will die. It will create chaos an' produce monstrosities. It'll force our hard-won materialism into sterility. No good, not good at all. . . .'

'Agh, materialism's terrible. I just can't see how a man can disbelieve the existence of God.'

'What God are ye talkin' about, man? If ye saw your own suffering genius, he'd frighten the daylight out of ye. Another half'un, please. This city is full of lonely ideas.'

'Yis sur. That'll be wan an' six.'

'The naked dream . . . for eighteen pence. Poor Ireland. . . .'

Poor Tamar . . . funny how the mind images. I knew a lass once an' her other name was Eriu.'

'Was she any good?'

'Good . . . ? Who am I to say what's good or bad.'

'Well, after all, it's only human nature.'

'What is human nature? I once saw ten bums mating one whore an' I wept for the bums an' the whore an' for myself. But that was just a luxury—another nicer way of saying noli me. . . .'

'I couldn't go for that meself.'

'Now my proud pity is trotting home. . . .'

'I don't git that wan?'

'Yeats only wrote about it in luxury. I'll do it. Tamar, me wife. . . . No matter. Tell me, how can I waste time?'

'The movies?'

'No!'

'Well, why not try a ride out t'Howth, now? It's nice out there.'

'Ben na Dair.'

'Aye.'

'The peak that's loved ^{best} throughout the land of Ireland, the bright peak above . . . lovely Ben na Dair.'

'Aye, that's it. . . .'

'Do ye know that an Irishman sang that seven long centuries ago? What has happened to us? What essential have we lost? We're older'n Greece—older'n India. What has speyed the strong soul in us? Tell me, are ye entire?'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Look after them. There's a man in this town who's goin' to operate on Ireland with a pair of scissors.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . . I know him! Fallon, the barber. He's nuts.'

'So ye say.'

'Sure, he is! He had the vocation—oh, years ago, when I was a lad. They say the club foot stopped him. Then he was foun' on the Bull Wall, bleedin' t'death an' said several

fellers had attacked him, but the po-lice discovered he'd done it himself—wan stone off an' the other half-off. . . .'

'Sláinte.'

The bus's brakes cried like a gull. Simon waits on the kerb for three nuns with magnificent starchwork, raven plumage, and vitreous prayer-glazed eyes. Three young girls giggle down the stairs but silence when they see the cloth. The conductor would have liked to joke the girls. He has one lively eye on their plump knees on the steep stairs and the other eye is solemn for the nuns. The girls glance at him demurely and then at each other. The nuns see everything but look at nothing. While attending respectfully to them, the conductor inspects the girls' three pairs of breasts. The oldest nun is stiff and the two younger ones help her down, their firm hands appearing like small white birds out of the voluminous robes. They nod and briefly smile to the conductor for waiting and then drift away, arranging their feathers. The three girls leap off, whispering together, glancing back. The conductor longs after their three bottoms, his hand on the bell. . . . 'Hurry along!'

Simon sits on the long seat where the nuns sat, three working-class wives with grocery baskets sitting opposite. The conductor comes down the steep swaying steps and Simon buys a fare to Howth. As the conductor delves into his leather purse for change, he leans over to one of the working women and says something, obviously knowing them. The woman nods and laughs, the other two leaning over their heads and laughing as well although they cannot have heard what was said. When the conductor moves out to the platform, they lean forward again and ask their companion what he said and then laugh again, all three, the conductor grinning back at them from the platform, very pleased at the success of his remark. He is a cocky young man with a pencil behind one ear. He has the habit of taking off his peaked hat to stroke back his wavy blond hair. He whistles absently,

throwing a quick glance at the women in case they are still looking at him.

At a further stop a fat, short old woman with an enormous bosom sighs herself onto the platform and sits on Simon's knees as the bus lurches to its bell, the conductor belatedly warning: 'Houl an!' The fat woman is well dressed; pretty grey silk costume and good leather handbag held in a soft many-ringed hand: a Miriam married, bred, prosperous and aged. The three women are valuing the Jewess's attire, identical scorn and envy on all three faces, as though the old lady had gypped them out of the money to buy her wardrobe and jewels. The conductor knows his audience. The Jewess holds out a shilling. He looks insolently down at the money, asking casually: 'Where to?'

'You know where Parnell Roadt, police?' she asks anxiously.

He glances innocently at his gallery, saying: 'I do, now. Up wid t'big fat woman in Moore Strate, m'am.'

'Zenk you. . . '

'It'll on'y cost ye sixpence—the chapest roide in t'town.'

'Zenk you.' She smiles at what she thinks to be Irish friendliness until the maenadic laughter of the three women makes her wonder what the joke is, and her gentle brown eyes rest on all the faces in turn, frowning a little against the loneliness of language.

The generous autumn-light shrinks to shadow in the bus, the women still chuckling in the gloom, the conductor grinning on his platform, stroking back his hair. . . .

The old race brasero again and again, thinks Simon, rising and pulling the bell-cord.

'This is not your stop,' says the conductor, looking from his face to the paint can and back again.

'Suits me okay. Which race is going to win, cock? Irish or Jew, Jew or Arab, Moslem or Hindu, white or black?' Simon asks, loudly enough for the women to hear. The sharp face whitens a little. He is nervous his remark might be

reported. The bus stops and Simon gets off, saying: 'If it wasn't an addition of injury to useless insult, I would have no objection at all to kicking your little white Irish arse.'

'Ye an' what airmy?' he asks, stepping off his platform onto the kerb, obviously intending to prove his mettle by swinging a quick one and leaping back on again and ringing the bell.

'Go away,' Simon mutters, turning as the man's right fist comes for his left ear. He diverts the blow with his left forearm, Ophion handicapping his right hand, slipping the left hand on round the man's neck and holding him. The driver has jumped down from the cab, waving his iron jack-handle. Simon waits a moment, then shoves the conductor forward to catch the conk on his blonde head. The conductor subsides temporarily into the driver's arms, the three women flattening their noses against the window and the old Jewess sitting in her fright, having seen too much of similar activities.

'If I get m'fokin' han's an ye,' shouts the driver, not knowing quite what to do with his mate.

'Ye educate that little sonofabitch in your arms t'have more manners.'

A citywards bus screeches to a stop. . . . Reinforcements! Simon goes towards it, meeting driver and conductor as they jump out. 'Hurry up! Those two damn fools are killing each other!' Hardly hearing him, they gallop over to their mates who have still got their arms round each other.

There is a park with bushes. Simon gets out of sight of the passengers on the upper deck of the second bus and finds a dense thicket, lying down in the middle of it on the dug earth that has the bodywarmth of the sun. He stretches out, pressing his body close to the soil, smelling it, running his fingers through it. O Ophion; water is your element, earth is mine . . . never betray.

Going to sleep, he watched a claue of jackdaws larking home across the oceanic sky. . . .

Wrangling gulls awaken him. The sun is older by several sobering hours. . . . Ophion! How are ye? Alive at all, now?

Ophion is very somnolent. Don't die on me, Ophion. Parks have drinking fountains. There go the gulls to shore with sunblood on their eggshell wings. Sycamores shed leaves, dry leaves squeaking as terrored harvest-mice along the paths in the golden sun.

Trees black against a snow sky always make me sad. Connecticut, it was. I wept for the beauty of dark trees on a hill and a woman out for a walk asked me why.

He bends down a twig and sees the bone-hard black bud. It is so stone hard it could be dead—never a spring again, the whole world sliding down into winter and standing there frozen. A small boy is watching curiously: 'Look, son. There's green an' lovely life in that hard little nubble of a bud—imagine, now. A whole big spray of leaves in that tiny space. . . .'

The boy draws a toy gun and fires an irritating cap at him, saying solemnly, 'Ye are dead', then cantering away, making kcht-kcht sounds with his mouth.

A sick blackbird is hopping unsteadily over the tilled earth of a flower-bed. It sways on its legs like an old man and tries to peck, falling onto its beak and swaying back on its tail. Simon hunkers down to watch it as the small boy canters back.

'What's wrong wid it?'

'Sick, I guess.'

The bird has keeled over. He reaches forward and picks it up. It is as light in his hand as one of its own small feathers. It reminds him of the three plumed nuns, naked they'd be small pathetic females in a shivering sunless skin.

'Why'd ye kill it?' the boy is asking.

'I didn't kill it, son,' he replies, annoyed and hurt. 'I don't kill birds.'

'What ar'ye goin' to do wid it?'

'Bury it.' He reaches forward and scrapes a hole, muttering:
'Rest now for ye have peace.'

'Kcht-kcht-kcht,' the boy says, cantering off again.

*Dead . . . but not stout Ophion. Drink the water of life
in an owl tin can, me boy. Ye'll die, begod, over me dead
body. . . .*

But the boy's judgement and the bird's death stays with him, echoing senselessly on in his mind as the sounds of his feet on the pavement shout with a peculiar metallic ringing like brazen knuckles on a pane of taut steel.

Three singles in three different pubs, taken slowly with equal measures of water: he will have to begin to be slightly abstinent, whiskey being hard on money.

With the help of the three singles he can sing to himself that Simon, his cheeks are as ruddy as marnin', the brightest af pearls do but mimic his teet', whoile nature wid ringlets his moild brow adornin'. . . .

Anonymous by alcohol, he loafs about, sitting on walls, standing at corners, sprawling on benches, watching the people. They see him no more than the stones they walk on and he is content. They never saw him at any time, he only thought they did, shouting at him, ringing bells at him, tooting their horns: the whole city is quiet, people go as ghosts, not seeing. They come and go—beautiful, repulsive, crafty, busy, lazy, greedy, generous, perfect, maimed, poor, rich and in-between, and none can tell him any more than he knows already.

Outside a few streets, he knows nothing of this city and its ways, its bright places and its dark places, from Dolphin's Barn to Inchicore, Donnybrook Fair to the Rakes of Mallow. It is old enough to have a personality but it has none: not Ireland, whatever Ireland is: the parish of Dublin, a curate in charge of every ten square yards. I'm lavin' Irelan' an' goin' t'Dublin. . . . But Ireland, now? Who and what is she . . . I have no land. Me mother was a wise woman when

she said that Irishmen don't know how to live, they only know how to exist. . . .

Remember, once upon a time there was a woman whose husband loved an old dog. But the dog barked an' gave the old woman an excuse to take a spite at it and for to nag since she was jealous of the man's love for it. He was loath to hurt the little animal but in the end, he had to make up his mind since the wife swore that if the dog didn't go, she would. The man had more affection for the dog but his wife was a human being and so, had priority. He took the hatchet from the turf-shed and led the dog on a bit of a rope into the garden. For a long time he gazed sadly at the poor beast, trying to invent some way that'd give it a fighting chance. All he could think of was to say to the dog, holding the weapon under its nose: Die dog or else ate the bleddy hatchet. . . .

Tell yourself another story, not such a deary one. . . . Well, it was the same woman, I suppose, but by now a widow. She had a small horse and she was a poor farmer, as well as being miserly. The horse cropped every blade of grass to the bitter roots in its small paddock and looked with longing over the fences at the lush crops around. It got more rawboned every day. The woman went out to it every morning, giving it a pat an' saying kindly: Love on oul harse an' ye'll git grass. But she went out one morning and found it with its four feet in the air and it stone dead. The mere sight of the useless bony carcase enraged her terrible and she roared at it, shaking her two fists the way women do, as if they could hit ye soundly with the two fists together: Bad cess to ye, she shouted, for an ungrateful baste! Could ye not belave me?

Dusk: come gently, O lamplighter.

Swiftly now, night, your stars and silken dark to gown the ruination of the city; transfigure the face of pain, disguise ugliness, chasten defeat with hope, make every honest man a prince and every broken man a pious wanderer. . . .

O God, there gather the Grey Ones in the thickening shadows.

Simon, another honest bowl of malt is indicated. *Where am I?*

He sees then he is back where he started, walking the same streets that had been thronged with lunch-time workers; and now the workers are heading home. He goes slowly to the spot where he had talked with Tamar's uncle and, standing against the wall, relives the whole experience, seeing gulls and man and feeling the man's fear and resentment, tears again in his eyes, whether for Tamar, for himself, or for the uncle he does not know.

'Haarraald! Aevenin' Haarraallld!' the old crazy woman. 'All the winners! Haarraallld. . . .' Her clarion voice is set on a hoarse and subtle timbre that transcends the city sounds so all can hear it. She sells manna. Men rush to her hoard. Holding the heavy block of papers on the shelf of her left haunch, she dispenses them with swift precise largesse. Men move to street lights and shop fronts to examine the results. One man curses, crushes up the paper and throws it from him and then becomes embarrassed and looks about in case he has been seen.

'Haarraallld . . .' still the gabriel voice, the flailing steps, the eyes staring ahead: truth teller, dream-teller, destroyer or fulfiller of the day's hope.

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EVENING

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DARKNESS and a salt wind off the lean grey sea. *Where am I?* The Plough reeling over a roof, the orange arctic star, out there the plunging ocean, night on its back, horsing a last defeated shore. *Go an' dress in seaweed clouts an' sup Saint Patrick's soup, cry famine with the gulls.* The emptying streets shining as jaundiced ice in the light; neither night nor day, now dawn nor evenset, old sunbeams caught in jam jars. *O this is cold eternal.*

Too many whiskeys: his eyes panic to people, hoping for one compassionate face, but the synthetic shadows leave no face alone, the false lights flowering pale moon-plants and then blighting them with leprous shade; faces minus jaws, phosphorescent skulls, eyes in dark masks, parchment profiles cut on coal.

Cold drunk, now, in a terrible land where people frosted by common fear hurry and hurry home from fear to find fear at home, frozen by their doors. Fear, Simon, is a coldness, the devil an ice-man.

Miriam: shut shop an' home, her little ladies all asleep after a provoking day. Could have sat by her fire, dreaming our native dream again for cold comfort, seeing her as she was then, the sweet embodiment of my earth. Sometimes women offer themselves in lieu of earth. But Miriam was straight from apple-tree land, brand new in my life. And now, Miriam is adult and Tamar is the child that Miriam was, plus the contradiction of a woman's belly. God, I was born backways, all my directions in reverse—me mother's womb a grave, the grave of a heaving womb, death the long foetal sleep back to the passion of conception when I watched my parents start a body for me. Simon, avic, remember that when ye look at Tamar and despise all the penis-play she's had, conception is still immaculate.

The hills stand round the city, lamp black and hardly to be seen save for a few stars climbing over their rims, the

autumn-hills changing to their fox-coats of bracken. O climb the bone-clean hills and watch the twinkling city in its stagnant pool.

O Autumn, what have I won in living seed from all the opportunity of Spring? I have escaped nothing, waived nothing, avoided no thought dark or fair and I'm no more than a thin dream away from any living man the world over. Down on the lakes now ye smoke your pipe of dry leaves in odd corners out of the wind.

An old decent woman is staring, frowning. He is sitting on a bench, the paint can on his knees, his two hands round it.

Dia Muire duit . . . he says to her softly. She smiles, at ease, nodding approvingly but returning 'God bless ye' in English.

'M'am, it's still the world's best tongue,' he says.

She goes on, nodding and smiling, both of them agreeing over two different things.

Time—on seven? The date with David Rea . . . tell him the party's off. Tell him the cows are home. Tell him a mouthful of sleep is better than a piggin of fermented stupidity.

Opposite his bench there is a hall next to a chapel and by the iron gates a huge placard announces a charity bazaar and whist drive for the city poor: twenty quid first prize, a suckling pig for consolation, donated by the blessed butcher Séan O'Nolan, and all for half-a-crown, refreshments extra. People are moving into the chapel and hall, crossing themselves with a damp finger of holy water as they pass the piscina in the porch. Reminds me, Ophion, I must get ye a sacred drink of fresh water.

Somewhere a radio plays a Chopin nocturne and he hunts his hearing after it through the thicket of common sounds, losing notes and whole bars as though someone were turning the set on and off for spite, guying the music much as a maniac slashes a painting. . . .

De herp dat wance in Tara's halls de sowl af music shed
Now hangs as mute an Tara's walls as if dat sowl wur dead
So shpakes de proide af former days. . . .

High tenor tuneless tremolant drant: a shawled woman with a tranced face cut in limestone leads a spastic man along the kerb, his blank, wet, gut-grey eyeballs naked to the sky, his hands tightly held together and shaking his whole body, producing the wavering tremble in his voice. 'Born Blind', the notice says on his chest. Towing him along the kerb, his feet shuffling sideways, the woman keeps saying in a monotone: 'Spare a copper, God save ye. A penny, now, may God bless ye. A penny for me blind husban'. . . .' Following, a shoal of children stare at the man, noting with ghoulis interest every twitch in his body, not heeding the song. Simon parts with a coin and a fat middle-aged man warns confidentially: 'It's all a cod, ye know? She's no more his woife dan I am. They hire him out.'

'My friend, if you're a student of codology in this town, ye'll never run out of material.'

'T'ings like that shouldn't be allowed!' he retorts, taking out the pipe to give his annoyance more room. He is a civic-minded citizen.

'Well, ye know what to do.'

'What?'

'Take the poor guy home an' look after him.'

He opens his mouth but cannot find a suitable answer.

'Or ye could ask the police to destroy him like a stray dog.'

'Hagh—smert!'

Plain-clothes detective sergeant Rea, reformed hillbilly, is on the marker. 'Well, Simon, how'd ye get on?'

'I'm a changed man, Davey. Just one half-day in this sacred college has finished off me education. I'm now the Most Miserable Simon Green, B.B. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

His merry laugh is only the half of him. He is also a moody

and melancholic man. His law-enforcing job is only a half of him, the other half still frustrated idealist and rebel. He reads a lot, rooking through the minds of other men for a life-reason. The reasons he finds ill-adapted for his own existence. He has had a rough sort of married life: six kids, the ecclesiastical quota, then full stop, Briget getting episcopal dispensation on account of a weak heart. 'Honest t'God, Simon, I've never laid a han' on her arse, not wance, much less seen it.'

'It's probably pretty much as ye imagine it.'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha . . . himm.'

That was seven and more years ago when he said that on the May-white lakes, a big green pike kicking at his feet in the boat, a huge man with a sort of gentle envy for Simon's life, talking over his disappointments. Davey had never had a youth. At eighteen he had been a rebel on the run and then a young married man in a tired Ireland.

Briget, a fine sandy woman, chaste and safe who would have to be dead to be cuckolded. Born in Carlow, she had worked in a Dublin shop and had helped in the Trouble as a runner, but had always nursed a *grá* to be a Sister of Mercy or Charity. She had married Davey, not exactly in spite, but as a second and inferior choice. The mounting count of babies inclined her to be more religious. Davey said he had practised withdrawal but that was not always to be reckoned on. Briget discovered her valid heart complaint and would not tolerate any other contraceptive method, refusing to mention menstruation let alone attempt to work out her so-called safe periods, a system Davey had picked up in the course of his duties. Briget knew all about it, but turned his imperfect information into evidence proving the depths of sexual depravity into which men sunk in their daily conversations.

Perforce, he accepted her continence, never challenging it for a motive which, in less pious females, might have been no more profound than mere cumulative sexual and domestic

boredom. While perhaps physically inept by lack of experience, there was nothing impotent about Davey, and had Briget not submitted to his marital administrations with jaw and fists tightly clenched, doubtlessly he would have discovered some pleasing and mutual variations over the years. But from the first night of the marriage, she had only consented in silence to fulfil the elementary biological functions, obeying her Church's rules, and had concentrated upon keeping her soul unsoiled. Simon was sorry for the big man but could suggest nothing better than a dictatorial re-establishment of conjugal rights. Davey shivered in his stride. 'God, man, ye don't know her! She'd lie there sayin' Hail Marys under her breath an' sufferin'. . . . A sufferin' woman is a most unappetizing thing. Sometimes I do think she hates the sight of me.'

Through ill-lit alleys, narrow backstreets stenching of unforgiving, unappeasable want; silently through a tumescent past, through slagheaps shrunk to their final size and crouching there in the darkness: night lending tangible anonymity to old and useless evils, hiding by day and prowling by night.

Enough, this is enough, he whispers to himself. O better far, life-long, to tell of time on a lurdane's dandelion clock, make friends with trees and ride their lofted branches, know firsthand the moon on ivory nights, storm's wine-press and the rain's indifferent wrath. Teach Tamar to draw a boat, to cook on an open fire, to bake fish in mud, cure rabbit skins, show her how white a shirt can be washed in a running stream, how beautiful a flower, how worthy grass.

'Ye know, Davey, there are big salmon in the lakes.'

'Aye?'

'Aye—a thirty-pounder jumped over the boat last week.'

'Never heard of anywan catchin' any.'

'I've seen 'em rising in a quiet evening. But they won't touch an ordinary lure.'

'My God, I'd like to go back with ye, Simon. . . .'

Poor Davey!

'What the hell made ye into a copper, Davey?'

'Och, we were all mad patriots, then. More like vigilantes than policemen—uniform, a gun, an' a Sam Browne. It was a wonderful change—askin' people to recognize us instead of crawlin' along ditches.'

His right arm swings awkwardly as though the limb were short and stiff until Simon realizes he has a gun tucked up the specially tailored sleeve, the muzzle sitting on his bent palm and all he has to do is to straighten his fingers and the butt slides down into them.

'O'Higgins didn't put guns in your hands?'

'What d'ye expect, man?'

'I dunno. Judo might be better. Guns always invite ye to use them. Doesn't seem to affect crime one way or another whether cops have guns or not.'

'Believe me, I feel better with this in me hand.'

'Do ye always expect trouble, then?'

'Never know. On'y last week a mate of mine had two young bucks blazin' at him.'

'Political?'

'Oh, always that. It's in the owl blood. Most of these Border dos are on'y pure cravin' for excitement. Ireland has become a dull and dreary place.'

'The Border?'

'I dunno. On'y one end I can see: make the twenty-six counties such a damn fine place t'live in that the North'll ask to join. Then ye can have a federal government with two states, like America. Plenty of Irishmen would agree to that. I can see the mistakes that were made. . . . My God, Simon, the Rebellion was a wet fart an' the civil war was a bad smell. Between them, the gombeen—lay an' clerical—got into power.'

'Davey, I couldn't care less about religion an' politics, meself. They're only designed for crucifying man between them.'

'Aye, that's largely so, now. Needn't have been. Boy, there was a power of hot sweet idealism at one time.'

'Feelings seldom last, Davey.'

'Aye . . . but there's a powerful reactionary force in this little country, Simon. It doesn't want real progress an' Dev has sold out to them. He never was a liberal an' rebel—on'y a legalistic Catholic conservative. Simon, never get mixed up in it. Let's sit on this wall a minit. A feller dodged round that corner . . . don't want t'walk ye into trouble, avic. This area roun' here's just as deep as it's quiet.'

'Why not go in pairs?'

'Oh, I know me way about. But I don't know what's wrong with us, Simon. We're damn near broke—the whole economy gone t'hell. My generation fought for a free chance at progress—now look what we have! T'North'd be in the same boat if it hadn't t'Bank of England t'draw on. We've nothing less than a disguised clerical dictatorship. The Church has always used political upsets to further itself. What's wrong with us?'

'Well, what ye are saying, I suppose.'

'Dev stands up an' says we're the most Christian country in the world—balls.'

'I don't know what should be done specifically, Davey. You're a bit of a professional, I'm not. I'm still concerned with trying to find my own way into the world.'

'That's all well enough. Ye are a free wanderin' man.'

'Maybe we should all be wandering men.'

'Himph. . . .'

'Well, I don't think anything's served by criticizing a leader in a personal sense. He seems, somehow, to take on the whole national destiny, fair and foul, and he's exactly the sort of leader the nation deserves.'

'We want another Parnell—an Irish Protestant who wouldn't give a damn.'

'Maybe. . . .'

'What hell can a Catholic do? If he starts a social reform

which the Church doesn't agree with, he is accused of modernism or materialism or somethin'. He's finished before he can start.'

'I know that. But I'm damned if I'm going to think in terms of races an' institutions, Davey. I want the man. I'm going for the basic morality. Once ye start trying to see the totality that is man, the whole thing begins to thin out.'

'Och, we can't avoid our social duties.'

'Yeh—but duty's a dangerous word. It implies the existence of a fixed law an' there's no such thing. Fixed law is the first paver on the dark road to totalitarianism. The world has yet no science of man. We've only a hodgepodge of moral dregs.'

'Well . . . ?'

'We've lost all idea of the universal norm and we keep on creating hypothetical absolutes in its place—like a worried doctor trying one drug after another on a dying patient. We've lost the conception of what a free man is and what freedom could be.'

'A man can never be free in this life.'

'I'm not saying we are free, dammit. I'm only trying to say that we can be free. But we've got to stop kneeling to hypotheses. We're looking for life an' losing the man. What's the use of a bag of gold in a dry desert?'

'Boy, Simon, ye've gone a long way!'

'No . . . no, Davey. I'm only at the beginning.'

'What do ye think is goin' to happen?'

'What can happen on these present terms? Everything's growing harder—more laws, dogmas, bureaucracy. What can any one man do but stand by and watch governments dig our graves while the churches read a pious byrial service. Our whole world could well become a bad cross between a Roman arena an' the decadent sexual orgies of the old Eastern cults. Religions and political institutions won't give up now until they prove themselves to be bankrupt. So, why worry

about this un-Free State? It'll stagger along till it falls. Davey, all that's healthy in us depends completely on our physical environment. Heaven, if ye need one, is here. There are no absolute standards of morality—there are no absolutes. The day we succeed in proving the existence of an absolute God is the day we are all in hell.'

'Boy oh boy, ye would go down well here!'

'Yeh, I know that—this could be the biggest heresy this town has heard since the Knights Templars were in the Phoenix Park. As nature to the plant, Davey, so is society to man. An' there's always the danger that even a strong personality, which I'm not, cannot overcome and resist the decadence in his environment. There must be sound personalities in this country who are going under every day—that's one reason why the new Ireland doesn't sing—its larks are blinded and in cages. That's one reason why I pray the Border will stay where it is—to stop Ireland from becoming another Spain. Ireland may still be the test-case. She was the British Empire's first colony an' ye'll see her theme being played round the world in a thousand dirty variations.'

'Begod, ye've surprised me. I thought ye were just whorein' round the States.'

'Oh, a little of that, too, Davey. All Jack an' no Jill. . . .'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha.' He stops suddenly, saying: 'Wait.' Stepping swiftly over to a shadow, an old shawled woman standing still as a stone, he asks roughly: 'What are ye doin' here?'

'I'm watein' for Broidie,' she mutters resentfully, looking sideways at him.

'Ye go on home—Bridie's oul enough to find her own way. Where is she?'

'She's at the pitchers, if ye want t'know.'

'Gwan home,' he orders tiredly, shooing her. She moves slowly, muttering a curse.

'Oul witch,' he mutters to Simon. 'Bridie's wan of her daughters—a whore down Harcourt Street way an' panged

full of the clap. That owl shuler has fifteen kids all alive an' ye could buy the boys for a tanner.'

'What happens to the kids with the clap?'

'I dunno. . . . There's more VD in this village than there is in London or Glasgow.'

'Don't suppose Dublin's no worse than any other city.'

'But this is a holy city, Simon!'

'Yeh, whores an' holiness often go together. Davey, were I a painter, I'd draw a city like a cancerous sort of plant—a queer insect-eating plant in Carolina called Venus fly-trap—it has pretty flowers an' lethal leaves; a dead sort of female thing with a fixed smile.'

'What are ye goin' to do with cities—they keep growing bigger?'

'I dunno. They're places where civilization rots an' dies.'

'What would ye do here if ye had full say?'

'If I believed in violence, which I don't, having seen too much, I'd round up every priest an' parson in Ireland an' exile them on the Isle of Man an' not let them out until they had agreed their major differences. An' then, I'd make them all take a terrible oath never to interfere in any way with a man's thinking, even if they guessed he was thinking himself into hell.'

'Ha ha ha ha . . . ye are a terrible rebel, Simon, bigod, ye are!'

'No . . . I'm not. I'm a reformer. Every man, even your particular coons in the Irish turfstack, has the right to live an' make his mistakes. I have great faith in the quiet absolution of Death.'

'Ha ha ha ha . . . but bigod, I'm glad to see ye! Wait here till I sign off an' report.'

Simon does not want to wait for anything, any more: hasten away, bury head, sleep and forget, the sweet annihilation of sleep, forget the sharp particulars and remember the smooth universals.

O Christ little brother if I didn't love the earth so much an'

this particular sod of it, I would go: and yet, my love denies me and delays me. The earth was made for man, going down and down slowly before man, trying to suit herself to the pace of his fall; the earth our sacrificed mother. . . .

Quick Simon, remember, before you jump into the swilling Liffey. . . .

When I was a boy, my first small garden had flowers, lettuces and weeds. I was about ten and the big spade threw me about and the small dry seeds seemed devoid of life. After I planted them I kept digging them up to see how they were but I could not find them in the soil. The earth had taken them to herself. And then one morning there were rows of tiny tender leaves that had raised mountains of soil off their backs, lifting their hands into the air and light. O I was full of joy for this small miracle.

My father had a big sow called Beauty although she was not at all comely. She farrowed fourteen pigs and reared them all, one on each teat. My father was proud. He was a good pig-man and believed in exercise and fresh air and let the little pigs gambol about with their mother in the fields. They could run like rabbits and played games, woofing in mock-fear. When she lay down for them they would fight for their teats, seven on the bottom row and seven on top, fourteen small white backsides with curly tails, the old woman grunting her milk down to them. They made me laugh they were so fetching.

By this time my garden was coming into bloom and I no longer made mistakes between plants and weeds. In the early stages the weeds were as handsome as the plants. The young green lettuce was tender and sweet. I ate the thinnings, letting the strongest plants grow on. I loved this garden and while my parents had no idea of the depth of my affection, they were pleased to see signs of industry and said that I had the green thumb. For the first time in my life I felt power, creative power, and I understood some of David's feeling when my mother read me the hundred and fourth Psalm.

Then one afternoon I came back from school. Someone had left the garden gate ajar. The pigs had got in, playing hallelujah, with the whole plot. They seemed to have concentrated on mine, but maybe I was only more aware of it than any other part. I wept with rage and pity and gave up in disgust. It seemed that something greater than my efforts had visited the plot, fouling it and raping it. Something a-moral and uncontrolled like a bad storm which tossed lovely unoffending trees: like a lunatic who slashes paintings in galleries.

I could not blame the little pigs. They were still carefree and innocent. I could not blame my sister for leaving the garden gate open. It was an oversight. I felt the same as when my grandmother, a very old woman, had died. No one, not even death, could be blamed. They had buried her and had made a green mound on her. I made a green mound where my plot was, a mound of soil like a grave, covered with hand-pulled grass. Some part of me I buried there: what part, I do not know. I have been searching for it ever since.

When I was twelve I first saw a city. By daylight it was a fairy place with lovely people, straight clean streets and envious shops. I thought I would live in a city and get to know all the people in it. We had a meal in a restaurant. It had white marble-topped tables with grey veins in the marble. It reminded me of the parish graveyard. When we came out the sun had gone and the city was grey and gloomy, the long streets reaching away into the dusk, the trams flaring bursts of green lights. I was frightened and two drunk men were arguing outside a public house, one calling the other a fenian hure, and the other calling him an orange bastard.

Rea comes, minus his gun, his right arm no longer stiff, leading the springly way to the pub and saying again: 'God, but I am glad to see ye, Simon. The spree's an me.'

This suited Simon since he was down to eleven and six and would have to think about sleeping somewhere.

'Any cheap clean joints about, Davey?'

'What for?'

'Sleeping.'

'Aragh, come home with me!'

The pub, much as any other, a square room with a row of snug doors down one side, yellow and narrow like upended coffins. Rea elbows the bar and orders two balls of malt. This barman is big, fat, puggish, with bushy eyebrows over pale blue boy-sleepy eyes; plump bare washerwoman arms with elbow dimples, a large silver hoop, embedded in the flesh of a daintily useless little left finger.

There are people in the pub, mostly working men grey as though the night had stained them with her fadeless dye of mothwing dust and dew; grey as God's deathless hand upon a mountain which grinds it to dust; grey as nocturnal Liffey running to the fumbling tumbling sea; grey . . . drunk: getting drunk again on the bare smell of the place: empty belly in the ole corral.

'Tell us about the States?'

'Don't know much—a hundred cultures trying to meld together. . . .'

Rea has great interest in America, possessing more hearsay knowledge than Simon has firsthand experience since he has two sisters in New York and a brother each in Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles. He gets sheaves of Sunday papers from all four centres and reads the news, advertisements and comics. America is his *Tir na Óg*. He hopes to go there but is scared. Were he parachuted into the Dust Bowl he could find his way to a relative without having to ask his road. Simon's America and his are two different places that are only slightly similar, much as Simon's Ireland and his are two different ideas.

Simon listens while thinking that mental possession of the world is a queer thing. Odysseus made a journey which the world talks about ever since; Dionysus, Alexander, Brendan the Navigator, even Columbus . . . the inherent danger in

arm-chair travellers. Rea has moved from New York to Boston. He has forty nieces and nephews, all going to college. Had they been at home they would have been digging an acre of land and living off the belly of an owl hung up in the turf smoke.

But this is the eve of the Feast of Michael and all angels; the Feast of the Mightys and their nine mystical degrees, the feast of Michael of the Sword, Michael of the Countenance, Michael of Wrath, Manitau's Captain, Christ-Captain and teacher of sweet Colm in Gartán's vale: Michael who always had a soft spot in his great heart for Irishmen and Ireland, his own country; Ireland's patron who went over the sea to the Sassanacs since they needed him more. . . .

Something is going wrong with Simon's liquor reactions. He is neither dizzy nor drunk, now, and he knows he should be floating on a bloodwarm lazy sea and possibly thinking about a reasonable woman to go with a bed.

But he is not reasonably remotely like this now. It is serious and quite abnormal that he is not. It makes him nervous. Whiskey has always been a faithful crutch. If it breaks now he will go crazy or else throw his leg over the first boat-rail he sees. . . .

Rea is confusing Irish Boston with Irish Chicago: no matter, not an All Father between them. To ease his home frustrations he sucks his ideas about American freedom like a dumb-titty, poor devil.

'Davey, with all due respects to the problematical contours of her soul, if I had that red-headed, chesty, big-hipped and fine woman of yours, I'd give her a bad heart. I'd say, quite calmly, get them down, me dear, an' over the kitchen table with ye. I'm fond of ye and this is one of the best ways I can demonstrate me affection. Now, rest there till I climb into me bathin' suit, the wan God made for me. . . .'

'Oh . . . ho . . . ho! Me heart, she'd cry. Me heart's awful—poundin' like a hammer.'

'That would be natural, under the circumstances.'

'Pantin' like a worried sheep, the big green eyes of her whirlin' in her head, she'd send me t'the scullery for a glass of water. An' upstairs for her drops. Imagine me paddin' about in me bare skin waitin' for her to get her breath back?'

'O chaste! The bonds of oul dacency locked in her warm heart. It is a peaceful treasure, ye have.'

'She can make a good cup of tea taste like paraffin oil.'

'And why not? A small woman can take the mightiness of spring an' drag it through the dour door of a December.'

'In the end, a reasonable man will buy t'peace of his house at any figure asked for. Oul Father John Kelly, God rest him, a practical man, advised me to take your way.'

'A misguided man—theoretically, a procurer.'

'Still, I'm fond of Briget—couldn't face a fresh woman at my age. For better or worse a man gets used t'a woman, Simon. If she only weren't spoiled so by the ways of the Church. And by this young man, O'Connor, who thinks every woman should be a nun and every man ashamed of his cod piece. Father O'Connor has no experience of a normal man's needs, wan way or another.'

'A bone clean man—righteous!'

'He hasn't seen anything but the rare end of an ass all his life. He's that religious he can't forgive his mother for being a female. This is the way we're goin'. Lust is a sin, but ye have to use it t'get children for Ireland an' the Church. So ye tie it on a stick, shut your eyes an' push it under the door an' count five. . . . Well, the young ones won't wear it. Soon as they have the price of the fare they jump on the boat. They say Liverpool is full of decent Irish whores. . . .'

'Sleep, then at home. I'll feign death, too, an' go as ghosts go, disguised by death, hieing the lakeland nights on matted wings of whin and heather, a *seandúine síge* with you my *bean síge*, our changeling building towers of fairy sand, we'll wail for Death at doors, spoil butter, calve cows unseasonably, tell sows to eat their litters, plug chimneys with green sods, yoke horses to carts through gates, shake

apples down, panic sheep, crying as curlews along the lime-lit valleys of the dawn. . . .’

‘I don’t know where it will finish.’

‘I dunno . . . petition John Bull to re-invade us.’

‘Aye, well . . . as I was sayin’. . . . But what are ye carryin’ about in that oul can? I wanted t’ask ye before.’

‘Have I not showed ye Ophion? I must give him a drink, anyway.’

‘A bleddy eel! Well, I’ll be damned.’

‘Davey, avic, that is a sinless scion of our noble lakes.’

‘Is he still alive?’

‘Oh, aye . . . long as I can keep his water fresh. He can live on his strength for months.’

‘An’ ye’ve hawked him about all day?’

‘I’m not sure—maybe he has carried me. When I can make up me mind, I’ll set him free. Let me cover him up. He belongs to the time when everything was hazy—before Noah—when the sun was like a street-lamp in a foggy night an’ the days long as twenty year.’

‘Aye . . . but drink up, man.’

‘*Sláinte*. . . .’

‘Hagh . . . himmm. Hou! on, I’m goin’ out for a piss. Top them up, Vincie.’

‘Do it in a bottle an’ sell it back to him.’

‘Ha ha ha . . . he might be sellin’ it back to me!’

Ophion. . . . I’ll cut the cages at home an’ set your friends free an’ they’ll go down the black lakes, over the sliding mud, ford by ford, fall by fall until they hear oul Manannan’s roaring an’ they’ll taste the bitter salt of freedom, going westwards through the muscled roots of the waves. . . .

‘Me brother John swears by Chicago—plenty of sun an’ plenty of snow. Must be nice to see three fut of white snow—we never see it here. . . .’

Christmas snowstorm, the snow-veiled lake made visible by snow whirlpooling round the street corners: girl with Elizabethan face in the cigarette kiosk so fluent that three kisses released

her: sleeping that Christmas in her brother's attic bed under a blanket of snow and she coming creaking up the stairs, the slippers slapping the stairs softly like flippers. O how beautiful her body, how soft and warm, cool-warm to me. . . . Simon, don't take me. Scared. . . . Don't want to do anything but let my dry body drink.

'Davey, avic, ye should surely get yourself a woman—if only for wan dacent memory to have instead of a few owl dark grunts under hairy blankets. . . .'

O she was so beautiful, tender, pure, so powerfully passionate. . . . Simon, darling, I love ye.

Sure, love. . . . O God, love, the hands flowering it, love anonymous. . . .

O why has my life led me from one place to another? Every man I see pledged to externalize some part of me.

'Davey, I'd one chance in seven years. An old quiet couple with a young daughter and a small farm, a slow river running through it round a western hill. I slept in their barn an' they got talking with me an' found a drop of Irish in their blood for me as a social gesture. Stay with us, they said. Yes, stay with us, the daughter said.'

'Well . . .?'

'It was autumn. The trees were afire. Had it been spring, now, I might not be here tellin' ye this, but autumn's a time to be alone.'

It seems to Simon that to all the people he has this day seen come into this pub, all the people he has ever seen come and go, his own mind is the common bond.

Dublin's avatars with atavistic pints of lethe in their pale-green hands, prescribed by the reverend Doctor Guinness. Saint Guinness, the man who changed dirty Dublin water into gold and drowned a sufferin' nation's cares.

'Sláinte. . . . Where was I . . . die dog or ate hatchet?'

'Live an owl harse . . .!'

A wet night in Texas, red oilfires fuming out of the earth;

a warm night in an Ohio haystack; cold nights on the Santa Fe trail; white nights in Manitoba; lonely nights everywhere, O Christ loneliness, isolation, looking for an earlier self whom, were I to meet, I wouldn't know. O go and build that goddamned house of sod, roll up in hedgehog leaves and sleep the winter into spring, birth as bears and find a frisky family at Easter. . . .

Two smart men with boxwood faces come in and lean nonchalant on the bar, puffing smoke at each other, inhaling so deeply and importantly that they could talk across Dublin with smoke signals. They could be bookies, tictac men, touts, tipsters, grooms, or veterinary surgeons: they speak a language of horses' names with times, weights, hard and soft goings, distances. They are in the money, drinking double brandies with champagne . . . a good sort of drink, thought Simon. It should be called the gilded lily.

The barman is very attentive to them. It pleases him to be setting up such tasty fare. He keeps one ear empty for their privileged words—horses would be winning again tomorrow. He cannot stay still, fussing with glasses, rubbing a damp cloth along the bartop, rearranging his retables along the shelves at the back, telling himself frequently in the mirror behind the till what a fine tavernman he is, but never missing the sight of an emptying glass.

'That barman, Davey. . . .'

'Agh, leave him alone, Simon. His father was a harmless, decent man. He cut his own throat.'

'Oh.'

'When he was shavin', it was. Before he died he explained he was tired lookin' so long at the same face.'

'My God—the meeting, Davey. The thing we all try to dodge most of our lives. If he'd only waited, he could have made friends with it.'

'Yeo was an oul Sixteen man—a great friend of the Movement. The military used t'use this pub as a clearin' house for information an' so it was seldom if ever raided. We used it, too, Yeo runnin' with the hare an' huntin' with

our hounds. It was like the feller with the *poitin* still usin' the chimney of the police barracks to let the smells away. . . .'

Were I to smell the real face of myself, would I cut the throat of this one? Were I to see myself stark naked as a man instead of this owl sack of spuds, would I jump in the lake? Were I to see the face of the living Christ now in this cobweb corner of a lavatory, would I go mad entirely or know peace?

'Davey, we can only ever see what we're able to see.'

'Aye. . . .'

'It is a great blessing we cannot see more.'

'Aye. . . .'

'When I was a boy I used to gaze at a field of spring oats with a kind of terror—the cool courage of it.'

'Aye. . . . I mind chasin' two unfortunate British Tommies through a cornfield. It was the height of our boots an' the damn fools lay down in it an' us able t'track them like elephants in snow. We hadn't the heart t'find them. I bet they never forgot what young corn looked like.'

'How many men have ye killed, Davey?'

'I dunno. How many men does any bleddy war kill? How many did a spy like Peter Yeo kill?'

'He killed one man.'

'Aye . . . he was a wild man, wan of the vintage patriots, nerve like steel rope. He had a fancy woman—the Countess Cathlín, they called her. The Cailín Bán! Ye may see her. When Yeo died she joined some sort of a psychic society. They say she has the stigmata every Friday. Ye would go for that sort of thing, Simon.'

'No. Too many dreams of me own.'

'Oh, I'm inclined to believe in stigmatization, meself.'

'I've an open mind, Davey. I don't know the natural explanation, but there must be a natural reason which we may call a small miracle in our ignorance.'

'There's some things that can't be explained.'

'By the same token, it'll surprise some of us if we start sproutin' a pair of horns an' splittin' the hoof.'

'Agh, if on'y I had your age again an' your knowledge, avic.'

'I'll give it all to ye. I'd sooner catch a hand of water from a running stream an' accept the seasons as they present themselves. All the rest—ye can have all the rest. An' I'll still have everything an' you'll have only trouble.'

'But it's not natural for a man young as ye to retire from life.'

'I'm not retirin'! I'm just startin' to begin to live. I'm only tryin to teach myself.'

'They'll not leave ye alone in Corran?'

'Oh, yes . . . long as they think I'm a little soft. They've still got the remains of the oul pagan respect for the lunatic. Maybe that's why some of these bloody bureaucrats can squeeze so much benefit out of their doubtful schemes.'

'Simon, ye have the grand spite of the rebel.'

'Rebellion's easy, Davey. . . .'

A quiet, repressed, respectable man comes in and, apologetically, rubbing his hands together, pretending self-absorption as though it shrouded him from any appraisal, orders a small scotch with a small cough, adding: 'Quiet, the night.'

'Oh, hasn't warmed up yit,' young Yeo boasts, dripping the pewter measure three times over the glass with a high-cocked small finger. The quiet little man adds water but does not drink, secreting a packet of cigarettes and lighting one while crystal-gazing at the glass as though he did not want himself to know he had any fags at all. He is a lonely, paunchy, nondescript man in a saggy dark-grey suit and his face is plain and pock-marked; a man not physically equipped to expect very much from life; a little man of the type that always makes Simon feel sorry and protective whether the disposition seems pleasing or not.

Watching Simon, Rea advises in a whisper: 'Mat Golightly. He had a go at the Church but didn't make it. When he has too many he sometimes mistakes the bar for an altar an'

starts intonin' prayers. He talks t'wimmen but never goes with them.'

A snug door opens and a big-beaked nose with a three-quarter bald head behind it, long strands of dyed greying sandy hair growing above the left ear and looped over the dome, gangles round the pub as though it had never seen such a place before. 'What's t'matter with the bell?'

'Sorry . . . ! It sticks sometimes. . . .'

'Okay, same again, Vincie. . . .'

'What's he hidin' in there for?'

'He's in with a woman. He deals in oul' horses—ships them t'the continent for pies. Horse pies, begod!' Rea shudders. 'Hocks Slavin they call him. He has fellers buyin' for him all over. He fills a bleddy boat with pore oul' nags, but there's money in it. . . .'

The snug door has shut to a dulcet draught of woman-laughter, drawing a swift glance from Golightly's left eye. Barman Silenus Vincie Yeo takes down two glasses by sliding their slim stems between the outspread fingers of his left hand and stands them on a round green tray. To the nearest eighth of an inch he knows where everything is and could tend his bar in the darkness. Cunningly and exactly he fills the glasses with brandy that takes the light as a tiger's golden eyes. Catching up two baby soda-waters between his knuckles, setting them on the tray without a sound, swiftly sliding the tray on to his palmed left hand which he elevates to shoulder height, he sets sail around the bar-end, past the row of grey-faced pintmen, their eyes respectful for the distillers' art. Canting cunningly his plump body, Yeo sustains the levels in the glasses like a boat-steward in a storm. Simon has to let him go: he is at his work, his world the rectangle behind the bar; he gives out nothing and therefore receives nothing, and lives on overheard conversations with which he is never personally concerned. If made to drink his own liquor he would be lost and would weep. . . .

'Drink up, avic!'

Metallic mouthfuls of stale magic; old wine in old bottles: have I no other answer, no better gesture than a crooked elbow . . . ?

Talk, some laughter in the other room as Vincie Barman backs out his broad rear to the closing door with a smile on his disinterested face.

'Wouldn't mind bein' after the duck on the stubble, now,' says Rea. 'Harvest moon last week. I used t'enjoy that. . . . Me sister was sayin' oul John Palmer's yow-lamb's up the spout. . . .'

He stops, embarrassed, suddenly remembering his own hasty confession of adultery, yawning, shrugging, backing away from the subject as swiftly as possible: 'Agh, well, that's t'way of t'world . . . himmm', giving Simon a quick policeman look.

'What's the matter?' Simon whispers, his March-moon soul leaping into darkness.

There is a score of things all hinged on the look, the inward eye of a pickpocket, the dirty black covinous Irish man-look, the generic race-arrogance so prehistoric that time itself despairs, fear and guilt absorbed by confessional contempt.

'Wha . . . ?' Rea is asking with Adamic innocence.

'Scared of the seven an' a tanner?' Simon whispers.

'Seven an' a tanner . . . ?'

Sonofabitch . . . seeing all his doubts coalesce into one hot white point of transcendent hate that arc-lights the big man trowling along the bank of the river, the big hand holding the butt of the rod, the left fingers gentling the loop of line, the flashing spinner and there Tamar coming along the bank trowling for a man. Rea nods, nice day. They talk, then blarney, laugh ha ha ha, Rea's eyes now peeling the clothes off her. He is putting his rod down, looking for a stone to moor it, letting the lure spin in the flow. Tamar is walking back to the ditch. He hurries after her, tripping over tussocks of rushes. Tamar sits on the ditch and he sits beside her, bending her back. . . .

'Finish y'r drink, Simon.'

Yeh. . . . All the bloody talk about Ireland and human tyranny, just talk; her two pale thighs sticking out each side of his dirty big sixteen-stone spud-sack of a body, the two of them bloody snails tied together by their own slime. That Rea is a friend, that in some strange way they are partners, that he is a policeman and sworn discourager of violence, sweetens Simon's gathering spite; by destroying this smugly discontented man he will destroy that part of himself which he has despised all his life, getting shot of all weakly compassionate affectations and walking out of this shebeen a free and emancipated man.

'What's t'matter? Ye don't look well.'

'I'm well—never better.'

'Have a brandy?'

'Yeh. . . .'

'Two double brandies, Vincie.'

'Yis, sergeant. . . .'

Sergeant detective plainclothes fornicating Rea, man of many ambushes . . . knee in the balls, knee in the mouth when he bends over. . . .

'*Sláinte.*'

'*Slán agus galar bráitir.*' O Christ little brother.

The pub becomes a merry-go-round, the bar with its lights behind the bottles a streaking blur, the random chink of glasses quickening into a jangle of raucous music. Simon holds on to the bar with sweating hands, fighting the assault of intoxication, straining against it, driving his whole consciousness until the delirium subsides, leaving him limp but sane. He stares at the amber sphere of brandy in his glass, challenging it and then swallowing it in one gulp, feeling it sink to his stomach and remain as intact there as a boiled egg.

'Take it easy—that's strong sthuff.'

'Davey, the decadent art of drinking is the using of the stimulant, not wallowin' in it. We drink like bloody Romans,

a fowl's feather in our waistcoat pocket. . . ' Rea is a familiar stranger now, a man with his own personal load of grace and sin which he can never share.

'The oul Romans were great men.'

'From a Gael, that's treason. We may have to use their scaffolding but we don't have to imitate their iniquity. Ye fought the grey ghost of Rome from the back of an Irish ditch.'

'Aye, mebbie, mebbie.'

'The Celtic expectation an' the Roman hush of death. But sleep now: go home Davy Rea and lay your length longside the nervous Briget in her asbestos papal drawers. Go now as a stranger, the crooked gun in your crooked sleeve, warder and prisoner in the common jail, smoker of fag-end dreams, your Briget's bush your mutual crown of thorns.'

'I don't know what t'hell ye're talkin' about.'

'Okay, you take charge of Ophion an' I'll go back to Briget.'

'Ha ha ha ha.'

'Harald?'

An old woman stands in the door, her eyes staring over everything, asking hoarsely: 'Evenin' Harald?'

No one seems to hear her. She sniffs and trundles herself in, her arm wound round the bundle of newspapers which she partly supports on the left haunch so she drags the left leg like a slight halt: edition by edition, the sateless presses stuffing the world's news into her arms, winners, losers, killers, rapers, robbers, preachers, poachers.

'Oul Cathlín. . . '

'I've seen her,' says Simon.

'She's a hard case. . . '

She is old, she knew Fionn and warmed herself at Brigid's ceaseless fire, feared Danes, proclaimed Éoghan Ruadh, cheered for Tone, wept for Parnell, bled with the martyrs, and shouted up Dev. . . . Simon feels he should know her.

He knows who she is, but the liquor keeps her name and identity away from him.

Moving crabwise to the bar and sniffing loudly, Cathlín calls for a half-un as though ready to die for it. Simon sees the big man's boots with hairy laces. . . . She looks sideways at Rea and Simon, running her forefinger under her nose in another long sniff much as a bow takes its note off a fiddle-string. The barman is checking shrewdly: 'Can ye pay for it, Cathlín?'

'I can!' She purses her lips around one front tooth that rides the lower lip like a stained cigarette butt, sniffing again with tremendous disdain, but not otherwise resenting. She half-smiles at Simon and winks, craftiness flickering very humanly over her dissipated face, the recognition pleasing him inordinately and enleaguening him in her stand against the barman's law—pay, if ye can't owe, or perish. Then her face becomes young, young as the morning, bleached into beauty by degradation as though she truly wore a trull's disguise to hide immortal loveliness.

She dives down and lifts the hem of her skirt, exposing a fire of red petticoat, two pipestem shanks loose in the sockets of the boots, and takes an old purse from a secret pocket on the thigh. Somehow, Simon has expected her to do this and he knows that from now on she will never make an unfamiliar action. Keeping an eye on her, Yeo pours her drink and waits for the money, the tips of his left fingers touching the foot of the glass. With her left elbow, she holds the wad of papers against her body, the purse in her right hand, the left fingers dipping into it while saying: 'Come an, gimmie t'bleddy dhrink!'

'No offence, Cathlín. Business is business.'

'Bissnuss me arse an' biled cabbage,' she mutters slowly without any spite, slapping a coin on the bar and snatching at the glass with her hooked right hand, rumbling the small quantity of liquid round before throwing it into her wide opened mouth, draining the last drop with a sigh of obvious

regret. She counts her change and purses it, winking suddenly at Simon as though to assure him this was all part of her act. After the wink, her face becomes shy and solemn and absent as she sniffs and scrounges her body inside her clothes with an habitual lousy gesture. She smells of rank clothes, urine and sweat, wafting wider these odours as she puts the purse back in its red pocket.

'Here's the Countess. . . ' Rea is whispering.

A tall gaunt woman, fifty or seventy, all in black save for clown-white gloves—shoes, stockings, blouse, beads, the face and neck floured and featureless under a thick layer of powder dead-white as burnt lime, the eyes dark holes in a snow-sifted ice-bound pool. She is round-shouldered and moves with a slight stiff stoop, tranced, drugged by far distances, her hands held before her body, one palm on the other, a drop of dried blood on the upper one. They all know she is there but no one pays any attention to her, the indifference a sort of respect.

She comes to the middle of the pub and looks about, her sight flowing slowly over people but not noting them, looking for him—the fallen father of Barman Vincent Yeo, he with the frightful crescent wound under his chin from ear to ear, his face still white with shaving soap, the look of last surprise still standing in his eyes. She will never find him that way, he is always behind her; when she turns, he turns, always behind her. She looks for him and leads herself aimlessly about the place. Under her black hat with its wisp of mourning veil there are little drops of blood in a beaded coronet around her forehead. Strangers: she can only ever find strangers, now. He is not here. He is still in hell, unrisen. Slowly she turns and goes out into the night, making no sound, the man she seeks padding blindly behind her.

Barman Vincent has his broad fat back to the room but sees it all in the mirror behind his altar'd till. He too sees his father's ghost, she haunts him with it every night. While she is there he does not move and only starts his fixing and

fussing when the door closes behind her, crossing himself swiftly and twitching his shoulders.

'Well . . .?'

'Vincie should throw a bottle at the henhouse.'

'Did ye see the stigmata?'

'No, I saw what could be the colour of blood.'

'What did I tell ye?'

'It's a wonder she doesn't go in her bare feet an' a bathing costume.'

'Agh, you're sceptical, Simon.'

'Yeh, could be . . . alas, poor Yeo. The merciless woman an' the sanctified nun are often the exact same thing.'

'Oh. . . I'm not so sure.'

'You should know—ye married one an' maybe ye bucked another. Wished t'god I wasn't so sure an' was more sure.'

The snug-door opens, bald-headed bronco-buster Slavin comes out, putting on a black homburg at a jaunty young-feller angle that is made comical by the dank lock of long hair draped over one ear. He looks round at the ear and pokes the lock up under the sweat-band. A woman follows him. The two men who talk only horses stop and look at her, so does Golightly now swaying very slightly on the balls of his feet, so do the working men. Rea nudges Simon: 'She's wan . . . but she's a stranger. Could be a Belgian.'

'The oul Flanders mare.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . Wonder how many oul hacks he had to part for her? Ha ha ha ha.'

The woman smiles boldly at Simon. He stares into her eyes, mating with her eyes, coupling their sight together, his eyes saying no, but go in peace sister. Pax Celtica, which is another word for shindig. In a pale pallid way she is, on the whole, pretty: to her audience, drink-primed and fresh, she is wholly pretty. Her ancient craft allows her to strip before the causal bidding in any man's eye. She has covered them all swiftly and knowingly. They are all her raptors rich with grunts of lust. She is defenceless but totally unafraid,

she has passed beyond fastidiousness, her soothing art has power to lull the viciousness in men and make them sleep.

Sleep: no. . . . O stay awake for forty days and forty nights rather than lay the heart bare to ruthless dream that would drag a harem of whores round the bed, each one of them wearing some part of Tamar. Simon, walk out'a here, walk out'a this stage-Paddy city, walk east where the sea is an' bum a sail to England, or bum a sail to Europe an' then keep walking until ye find just one wise man.

But Tamar was wise and kind once, child wise and kind, now maybe woman wise and kind. Ye saved her life an' she saved your life, facing it round from a track that led nowhere but a bog: lacking all other reasons, gratitude is not the worst.

And there stands Rea, priest-gelded, nagged celibate, rich in the autumn of his lust, his snail-shell of desire glued to his ear so he can taste the salty wash of passion in his blood, his hand, his wife, his wife now continent, ridding her womb of all mortal taint.

Simon swallows another brandy to dull the brutal rage of pity in him. Pity, pity, pity, O lengthless is the vibrant string of pity, the bloodless navel-cord that ties all people to each other.

O take no stone, write Tamar, Tamar, Tamar on the remembering earth. Has not a whore a heart, eyes, lungs, arms, legs, fingers, movements; no wave without wind and shallows make the most noise. Deep, Simon, go deep down, where the unbred thought lies like a seed in the lagan. . . .

This woman has arranged her frilly blouse to make the most of herself. She is thin, the ridges of her haunch-bones visible under the tight grey skirt; tight skin on her face, overlapping teeth, her nose straining away from its roots as though an unseen hand were pinching it, the nostrils high and the cartilage between very prominent; no beauty and yet her reputation makes her beautiful if beauty is a thing to be sold; someday she will retire and wear the latest fashions, no man able any more to lust her, the raffia hair

the same, the fixed smile the same, her eyes the same. . . . But now she stands on one foot, moving the other leg slightly back and forth, pressing the knees together in simple but profoundly suggestive mime that draws every eye upon her, Slavin and Yeo excepted, each man aware of the silken chafing of thigh against thigh. She makes no gesture or expression of objection.

Slavin is talking intently to Barman Yeo, holding a fat bare forearm with the tips of his fingers and typing out his words with the other fist on the bar. They are cooking a deal about a car. Yeo the vendor and Slavin the go-between gombeen, that sort of smart workless bastard who goes around scratching people's backsides, spreading wileful rumours about bargains.

'Over the Border,' Rea whispers. 'Change the numbers an' ship to England. Half of these fellers'd feel a draught if t'Border disappeared. . . .'

The woman puts her small shoes together and looks down at them, brushing absently her skirt. As though by command the men all stare at her shoes. And although, for better or worse, she has already half a night's fee inside her, she looks coolly over at the self-mortified Golightly and nods almost imperceptibly, turning slowly and idling towards the door. He jumps as to the jag of a pin, the whiskey in him shortening his native caution. He throws down the heel of his drink and moves from the bar, a small, glad, grateful smile on his face like a child promised a present if it closes its eyes and opens its mouth.

'Himph. . . .' Rea grunts scornfully. 'She'll not win much offen him! He'll only blarney with her.'

Slavin, with horse-dealer omniscience, has seen it all in the mirror at the barback and whips around, demanding: 'Where d'ye think ye're goin' ?'

Golightly stops, looks down as though meditating, a pulse throbbing betrayingly in his sallow neck. He is no longer worried about the woman, or indeed about Slavin. He must

do one of two things, go back to the bar or else go on out. The little face he connives so hard to save is in danger of total loss, a dozen pairs of eyes waiting on his next hop.

'Where ye goin', I said . . .?' Slavin demands impatiently as though he really did want to know, towering over the small man and putting a hand on his shoulder and turning him round.

Golightly frowns as though pondering a profoundly serious question and then raises his eyes to Slavin's, saying with a hint of apology for mentioning a common indelicacy: 'I'm goin' for a piss . . . if ye want to know.'

'Hagh . . .' Slavin grunts.

'I don't like that big guy, Davey,' Simon complains.

'Keep out of it. . . .'

'That starved little spoiled priest could be doin' with a nubble, whatever form it takes.'

'If he wants wan, there's plenty more about.'

'When ye're lookin' for them, they're often hard to find. That dame might'a suited him. He could still nip out if I had a peaceful argument with that big bastard—eh?'

The woman is waiting at the door. Golightly mouses back to his place at the bar and waits till Yeo and Slavin have arranged their affairs.

Cathlín, who has been standing staring at nothing says suddenly: 'Hagh!' They all look up. Putting her head on one side, she mimes impudently:

'Clipped arse, clipped arse, where are ye goin'?

Wet back, wet back, what's it to ye!'

'Where'd ye hear that riddle, Cathlín?' says Simon, surprised. €

'I know many a wan, me son.'

The Belgian hure undulates her slow hips through the door as Slavin follows, saying importantly: 'See ye t'morra, Vincie. . . .'

With a twitch of residual annoyance, or perhaps regret, Golightly orders another small whiskey, fixing his tie and licking his lips, fretting that maybe his excuse to Slávin is not being accepted by the majority, the gauge by which he will live and die.

Cathlín is laughing silently save for a faint wheeze in the gaping redness of her throat, turning to Simon and asking: 'Have ye heard the wan about t'man an' the dog?'

'Now, Cathlín! Keep it clane . . .' the decorous Vincie warns.

'Ye are an extraordinary canting bastard, Vincie,' Simon says coldly. Vincie looks over, surprised.

'Aisy,' Rea warns, putting a hand on Simon's arm.

'He knows what I mean.'

Cathlín turns to Vincie, saying in a near-cultured voice: 'Your ideas of cleanliness an' mine are sometimes two entirely diffren' things, me bucko! Himph. . . '

Then she turns to Simon, saying intimately: 'Well, ye see, son, there was a man wid a dog an' he liked it but his woman didn't since she couldn't stan' the man to be fond of anything.'

'I know that story well, Cathlín,' Simon says quietly. 'What am I to make of it, now?'

'That's a story out of the Irish Bible, avic. I've many a wan like it but nobody ever lissens to me.'

'I know ye, Cathlín?' he queries, frowning as he fumbles through the vat that is now his mind.

'Sure ye know me,' she answers softly, nodding. Coming closer, she holds her right forefinger under his nose, beating three or four times before she speaks:

'Don't ye foller my road, me son. The right track's the straight wan. On'y the crooked tracks do turn. Memories often on'y keep the dead awake. We all try to go home backwards in revirse. Ax me no questions—I'll say no lies . . . eh?'

Changing swiftly, she creeps over to Golightly and leers

up at the side of his face, saying clearly and suggestively: 'There wus a time, me love, when min faught over me!'

Golightly stares at his drink, saying as though addressing it: 'Get the hell away from me,' shrugging one shoulder after another against the ripple of amusement washing round the bar.

'Niver mind—niver mind,' she condoles good-humouredly. 'Ye allus lave the pretty looks behin' an the bid! Heugh heugh heugh. . . .'

He lifts his drink to his lips and she pokes him in the pants. He yelps like a woman and chokes, Cathlín laughing and twitching herself forward several times in movements of pure lewdness because she is so utterly undesirable. 'The men I carried, me laddo, are all dead. Most of thim died fightin' for a betrayed drame but that's a godamn sight more'n any af ye will do. Ye're all talk, fock, booze an' prayer—himph!'

'Now, Cathlín!'

'Now, Cathlín, me ancient Irish arse . . .!'

She moves towards Golightly again. 'Git t'hell away from me!' he pleads desperately, wiping the whiskey off chin and tie, protecting himself as she makes a false pass at him.

'That's enough, Cathlín . . .' Vincie warns again.

But she has the floor, now. Moving swiftly back to Simon, she looks up at him, humbly and gently, and he sees in her old, time-abused face a loveliness tender as a cirrus-saddened moon.

'Here is the dacent boy!' she declaims, turning to the others. They are all nervous of her. She forces them to observe her.

'I could tell ye your fortune, me son,' she says confidentially. •

The others smile, thinking she is off their backs, but she assails them again.

'Aye, laugh, laugh. . . .'

Striding to the middle of the floor, she raises her right

hand, shouting: '*Go saoraid Dia Éire!* . . .' waiting with exact timing in the silence before she moves again. Then, with great sadness, she gazes down into the well, of her memories, beautiful as a medieval madonna.

The door opens and the Great Gombeen, Lavery, comes in, walking to the bar drunk-straight and steady as though he were balancing a ball-bearing on his head, his eyes fixed, cigarette in the mouth, black homburg tilted over the right eyebrow.

'Double . . . Irish,' he mutters, the cigarette moving rapidly with each syllable.

Yeo considers him a moment and then suggests, gently: 'Better make it a small, Mr Lavery?'

'Very well . . . small.'

'How's business?' Yeo asks as he hands over the whiskey.

'Fine.' Greedily he takes the glass, his eyes fascinated by it, cupping his mouth to it, closing his lips and swilling it, soaking his taste glands in it before he swallows, shuddering with nausea or regret. . . . 'Fine!' his voice abruptly businesslike. Putting the glass back, he stares fixedly at his reflection in the mirror, moving a little to dodge a gold-printed word, a grey and empty face staring back at him from between the piers of two port wine bottles. He rasps his file of a tongue round his pickled mouth, sucking his lips into sudden hollows, and absently makes an unconscious minor adjustment to the cant of the homburg. Pushing the glass back a few inches in a gesture for more, he blinks rapidly as though thinking over what may be on his mind, then pats his pants' pockets. He is embarrassed, glancing sideways and licking the end of the cigarette, rolling it half an inch over his lips and back again, then plunging his right hand into his inside pocket and pulling out the back of a cheque book: 'Change a cheque, Vincie . . .?' innocently, shyly, the left hand fingering the top of a black fountain pen in the breast pocket.

'That's all right, Mr Lavery. . . .'

'Oh. . . .' He nods, looking again at the empty glass and pushing the cheque book home again, pinching his nose with his left thumb and forefinger.

Yeo waits, looking at the empty glass, not offering a refill nor wanting an acrobatic cheque. 'Himph!' Lavery says, nodding, brushing the dust off his vest with his right knuckles, not flicking, really knocking it hard, many times, as though he might well be trying to knock off something more than cigarette ash. He looks down, shudders, and turns away, pausing to plot a straight line from bar to door before he essays to traverse it. . . . 'See ye tomorra', Vincie,' he throws over his shoulder as he braces himself to start.

Looking after him, Vincie shrugs and announces absolvingly: 'Wan of the smartest min in Dublin. Too hard on t'booze. . . .'

Cathlín snorts. 'Dublin's full of smart min! Look at ye all! An Irishman on'y a biteen of a man if he has a glass in his han'. . . . Look at ye! I've seen it all, aye. Martyrs af min an' heroes walkin' thim oul strates.' Dramatically she points, making them obey her finger.

'Ye're all ashamed! Why? Why are ye all ashamed? Trouble—is it? Sure, it's only asleep. Sixteen an' t'Green on the G.P.O.—ye think *that* was somethin'? I tell ye, the min that died would be cryin' like babbies now if they could see the state of the ancient drame. We wur once the world's dramers af freedom—what are we now?'

'I suppose ye had tay in t'parlour with Parnell, now?' one of the horse-talk men jibes unwisely.

She moves, crouching, over to him, so threateningly that he lifts an arm across his body. Rea is whispering: 'They say she was a nun an' forsook the veil in Sixteen. She carried dispatches for the boys an' the military stripped her several time but never found anythin'. She had the papers in a frinch letter in her hoojah. . . .'

She stares at the man until he begins to shrink while

trying to keep a flippant smile on his face. 'I saw him, then!' she whispers. 'I saw him in Cark City an' me a slip of a girrl—aye.' Raising her voice: 'No, not be Englan', not be Irelan' was he betrayed an' martyred . . . no! Julius S²aysar—sacrificed to S²aysar, an' twinty odd year later the Dail went through an' the spirit af the Fianna was broken. I know, aye. . . . I know.'

She relapses, seeming spent and empty, sniffing absently, her eyes closed, features crafty again, muttering: 'Himph!' Adding, plaintively: 'I'm a pore oul woman, now. . . .'

'Drink ye up,' the lavish Rea advises, nodding to Barman Yeo who will fill and fill glasses for money until eternity. . . .

'But there's life in me yit!'

They look up, surprised, thinking she had finished.

'Aye . . .!' She opens her mouth and inflates her lungs, gulling a long whinining yee-hooooo! picking up her skirts and skipping about in the red petticoat, the potstick legs churning in the sockets of the big boots.

'That'll do now, Cathlín!' Yeo warns.

She lets her skirt fall, his warning blighting her gaiety, her face empty and solemn again, nodding her head several times as if in full and sad agreement with Yeo. Then she comes over to Simon, saying craftily: 'A fine young man like ye, now. Have ye a coin for an oul ribil?'

He gives her a sixpence, shocked by her arrant servility, and she mumbles a thankless 'God-save-ye,' holding the coin in her lips and going through the purse pantomime again, storing the gift. When the purse is secure, she gazes round as though in a strange place, moving her head from side to side like a disturbed fowl in a dark night. Hitching up her papers, she sniffs, moving her lips to some thought and then goes slowly to the door, starting her a-human stentorian cry: 'Haarraallld. . . .' The door swings to behind her but no one moves till her voice has faded away.

They all start talking about her, racing each other to sketch her hearsay biography, one of the horse-men repeating

the legend of the renegade nun and rebel runner for the pleasure of imaging the laden condom in its hide.

'Agh. . . .' Yeo scorns, 'She tol' that wan herself!

'Nobody knows where t'hell she come from. . . .'

'She was an eddycated woman in her day,' defended the second horse-man.

'She's an oul hure. She'll still part, begod,' a workman asserts.

'Agh. . . .' a voice shudders. 'Who'd ever want t'fock the likes af hur!'

'Pricks have small conscience!'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'I tell ye, she was an eddycated woman,' the horse-man insists.

'Agh. . . .'

'She's on'y an oul heretic bitch. . . .'

'And what is a heretic?'

They turn to Simon, wonderingly.

'What makes any person a heretic in these enlightened times, may God save them!'

Silence. Yeo pauses in his bar-rubbing.

'You? You used the word—what's it mean?'

Silence. The first horse-man shifts uncomfortably, glancing to his friend for support, his eyes saying: 'Will ye lissen t'this bleddy fool. . . .'

'Ireland an' heresy have no connexion. Heresy is a black dirty fear-word coined from brutal ignorance—a word like a knife or a knuckleduster in the dark. You smug bastards use it very lightly. The heretic ye mean could well be the sonofabitch who lights the fire. . . .'

The tension is relaxed by the reappearance of Laverty. He bruises impatiently through the door and stalks straightly to the bar, so full of liquor that it would spill out of his gills were he to bend over too far. He stands at the bar as before, his two hands on it, fingers gently drumming, the cigarette between his lips, but this time the black homburg is on the

back of his head as he sways gently on his heels. Yeo goes to him, leaning over on his left elbow and saying confidentially: 'Ye've bin here before, Mr Laverty.'

'Oh,' he mutters, pursing his numb lips. 'Well. . . .' He moves the right hand towards the jacket pocket, muttering: 'Change cheque?' offhandedly.

'No, that's all right. . . .'

'Himm . . . all right—see ye tomorra. . . .'

Nodding, he turns and marches out, lifting his feet high as though he kept seeing a step before him.

'Pore bastard. . . .' Yeo sighs with a sad eye. 'Niver seen him so far gone. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha! My turn to laugh!'

They stare, shocked, at Simon's unmannerly and unsympathetic laughter.

'O cork o be jaysus o! Here we all are—traipsin' after Citizen Laverty like ducks waddlin' down to a marsh—an' then ye have the bloody effrontery to sigh: Agh, pore basthard, never seen him so bad. For the sake of God Almighty, let us be honest beasts!'

'I doan't like the tone of y'r voice,' the larger spoiled jockey comments, listening for a neigh of support which did not come. Yeo himself is only anxious for the safety of his joint and the peaceful continuance of his profits.

'Put your two fingers in your ears, then.'

'I will lay me fist on your big gob.'

'Brother, the only thing ye're ever likely to lay is a bet or a broad. I'm only trying to say that we needn't believe the say-so of this pub priest who lawfully assists the Lavertys in all of us on their rollicking road to Grangegorman. Heresy—aye! If ye want the word ye can have it. I'll instruct ye how to employ it. A horse-race is a heresy against horse an' man, four legs sweatin' home at five to one. Any unwarrantable luxury in these times is not only a heresy, it's a sin against the Ghost, itself. Tell that wan t'Father Pat. Ah' ye might also whisper it to those of us assembled here, an' Mister Yeo,

wan of Ireland's uncrowned regents, will doubtless supply the stimulant to enable us sustain our mystical exaltation.'

'Ha ha ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'But for Godsake, let us not delude ourselves that we're Christian conscripts in a papal army. Our history may be a myth, our origins questionable, our existence a peculiar joke, but no bastard alive can rationalize us. He has to put us down the same way as he took us up. We are indeed a most religious people, thank God, as the cannibal said when he ate the missionary.'

'Ha ha ha ha ha.'

'Myself—I'm a reformed drunkard. I'm on brandy, now.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Aye . . . if our macabre sense of humour could only invoke honest laughter, we might begin to assert our true independence.'

'Drink up. . . .' Rea encourages.

'Drink. . . .' Simon whispers. 'Ophion—must water Ophion.'

'There's a toilet roun' the back.'

'Telephone poles out front. . . .'

'I'll show ye—want a piss meself.'

Rea leads through a door between the snugs and bar, along a cool tomb-flagged passage, smelling mossy-dank, and illuminated by a couple of weak yellow bulbs in the uneven whitewashed ceiling.

'Reminds me of Newgrange Tumulus. . . .'

'Quare place. . . .' Rea chuckles, stopping in a small oval space lit by a green-painted bulb overhead which creates a chill vespertine atmosphere, the silence augmented by the muffled footsteps on the pavement overhead. 'What d'ye think of this . . . ?' ●

It is a stump of a tree with flaking bark, about three feet high and three in diameter, its table littered with white stones and various shells from the seashore, a bird's nest in the middle fashioned out of seaweed filled to the brim

with variegated pebbles, a seagull's beak and skull, delicate as a Chinese miniature ivory, one large exotic mauve shell with a handful of common white wing-feathers in its mouth. On the white walls there is an untidy tapestry of tongued seaweed and a large photograph of De Valera in a gilt frame under two small crossed tricolours.

'Vincie's a strong Dev man,' Rea whispers, as though whispering were proper.

'He's also a strongly subconscious merman!'

'Aye, odd feller. He plays here with these things like a kid with a babby-house.'

'Tir na Óg, begod!'

'Aye, ha ha ha ha. . . .' Rea laughs, undoing his fly and going into the lavatory, holding open the green door with his rump and saying: 'That other big door used to be t'escape route in t'Trouble.'

There is a watertap on the wall and Simon changes Ophion's small habitat, letting the tap run on, the water-sound exactly suiting the atmosphere.

'God! Thought it was ye. . . .' Rea comments, coming out of the toilet. 'What are ye doin'?' ^

'Filling it with water! It should be full of water.'

'Turn that tap off—ye'll flood the place!'

'No—let it run while I make me water. It is a very sympathetic sound. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

Footsteps knocking overhead, sea-cave air, the tide not far away. . . .

Rea is toying with the collection on the stump, asking:

'What would wan of them psychologists say t'this, now?'

'Dunno. Probably only lay his own inhibitions on top of Yeo's an' make a case of them.'

'Aye, ha ha ha . . . come on.'

NIGHT

EMPTY stomach; many drinks, long past normal inebriation, now. What was the next stage—blindness, numbness, words spilling from rubber mouths. The marine atmosphere of the cellar persists in his mind, the air thick, the customers small as pygmies in a doll-house pub and very far away, everything out of focus, perspective gone. He makes an effort to adjust this new distortion, discovering that his breathing affects it: when he inhales the images become vague and water-shot, but by using shallow, small breaths and holding them, he can keep both sight and sound in tolerable focus.

‘What’s the time?’

‘Goin’ on nine.’

Two strange customers are at the bar: one is tall, sandy, good-looking; his companion is shorter and weedy-dark. Simon knows the first one, his name is Ramstam Keane, a Corran man and once an effeminate boy who developed into an adolescent masher, incapable of leaving a female alone between the ages of four and ninety-four, bribing little girls with penny slabs of toffee to show him their underneaths; withal, he could sing in church like an angel with a pellucid Irish tenor, making pious hymns sound like the Kashmiri love-songs in a sensual tropic night.

He is staring at Simon, frowning and half-smiling uncertainly, then coming over and saying hello with a wet, warm flabby hand. He is only two years over Simon’s twenty-five but looks a debauched thirty-seven: soft, with a pouting pot, bag-eyes, fat-jowls, middle-aged fifteen years before his time but still movie handsome. Simon vaguely remembers that he never liked him, not because of his erotic exertions—the whole school had been fogged with adolescent eroticism. His basic reason for dislike was that Keane, although well-dressed, always exuded a sour-sweet cheesy smell like the hybrid odour of old bread-and-jam sandwiches. Simon shudders against the memory of that time when his whole life

seemed dominated by smells, most of them bad: his father smelled of cow and pig, his mother of carbolic soap and eau-de-cologne, the rector of his church-cum-graveyard.

Buller. . . . Keane is introducing his friend, an Englishman inspecting the Dublin zoo. Simon knows he has been noted as an exhibit. There is something suspicious about these two. The Englishman says nothing and takes in everything. Both are respectably oiled. Keane is curious.

'What's your business these days?'

'Selling eels,' Simon informs briefly.

'Are ye still in Corran?'

'Yes an' no. I've taken to the bogs. I have a woman there.'

'Do I know her?'

'I doubt it. Her surname is Nature. . . .'

'Ha ha ha. . . .' looking at Buller.

Keane is working in the city, some sort of schoolteacher in some sort of a private school. Rea discovers they share mutual acquaintances. Buller listens, glancing round. He looks for something, hopefully, apologetically. He smiles a little smile at Simon.

'What part of England?'

'London—know it?'

'No . . . some day, I suppose.'

'Oh.' He does not say oh, he says ow.

Two memories assail Simon's mind, connected with these two men: the first one has to do with Keane. He had something to do with Tamar Palmer. Their mutual reputation would make it likely but the memory was older . . . *can't remember.*

'You've had an interesting life. . . .' Buller is probing.

'Yeh, suppose so.'

Better imply to this guy he is smelling round the wrong sort of fence-post. . . .

Grey shadows are thickening the pub. They push between the customers and gather in the corners. No one seems to notice them, the general talk drooling on inanely, the cus-

tomers picking material for their next witless remark off the preceding comment like gamins finding still lit fag-ends and sucking a few mouthfuls of smoke.

A wounded voice that could be his own is crying from the streets: *Water! Water for God's sake.*

Old Cathlín is singing hoarsely: 'Oh me dark Rosaleen, do not sigh, do not weep. . . .'

Order! Let's have some semblance of human order! one of the shadows shouts. They are arranging themselves in a rough semi-circle around the gaudy till, their empty eye-sockets on the articulate one who seems to be a temporary leader in the mime and who wears a battered homburg on the back of his head and carries a baton, a fragile gull-skull mounted on a slender stick.

Water, water. . . .

Ha ha ha ha . . . rhythmic, hurting, anonymous laughter from massed throats.

Order. . . .

'O there was lightnin' in me blood, red lightnin' in me blood, me dark Rosaleen. . . .'

Ha ha ha ha. . . .

Water for the sake of God!

Rea and Keane are talking now about Corran, mentioning familiar names, going over the cot, coffin and bed results: Pat McGovern gores his bull, cows alarmed; the wife of Puck Pratt, parish billy-goat proprietor, who has a pew to himself in church, has produced her fourteenth kid.

'Ha ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee; and I detest my sins.'

'Golightly's off.' Rea announces.

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'What are you drinking?' Buller asks gently.

Leading question. . . . Tell him you're a teetotaller: tell him. . . . 'I'm all right, thanks. I'm with Rea there.'

'Oh.'

'Oh, we're just old friends. He's a much de-married man.'

'Who for Thine infinite goodness art so deserving. . . .'
Golightly in gothic prayer, his elbows on the bar, his hands together under his nose, a shadow either side of him, looking into each other's eyes in empty amaze. . . .

Thinking now I'm Rea's fancy-boy. Tell him about the time ye were broke, Simon: 'Ye see, I was broke in New York. A pansy picked me up. He had a nice apartment. He stood me a quadruple whiskey.'

'Really?' He says Raillai. Pat, Ou' Raillai.

'Yeh, but I emptied the liquor into a potted chrysanthemum. To make a long tale short, I put the glass on me head and walked out.'

'Oh . . .?'

'Do you know what he wanted to do?' Whisper. 'He wanted me to git into t'bed wid him, honest-t'-Gawd! Me—a pure, religious Irish boy raised on the gentle breast of innocence.'

'To hear y' swate an' sad complaints, me life, me love, me saint of saints, me dárk Rosaleen.'

Laverty appears again, the homburg in his left hand, the knot of his tie under his right ear, his lips clenched together. He tries to swim to the bar through the shadows but gives up and stands still, his head moving back and forth, his eyeballs swivelling. Absently, he takes a cigarette packet from his jacket pocket and forages in it with a finger and thumb. The packet is empty. Impatiently, his long fingers nag at it, turning it round and round, niggling at it until it drops to the floor, the fingers continuing to peck costively among themselves. He looks hopefully over to the bar. Yeo ignores him. He keeps his eyes on Yeo, poised to pounce on the first glance that comes his way, but Yeo knows that the bat of an eyelid will cost him a packet of fags.

The ~~mine~~ master raises his baton, shouting, 'Order!' Laverty shifts his gaze off Yeo and stares at him.

'Well, as I was sayin': I says what t'hell d'ye think ye're sayin'? That was after he said. . . .'

'Blessed be the great Mother of God, Mary most holy. Blessed be her most holy an' Immaculate Conception.' Golightly is standing up at the bar, raising his whiskey glass like a chalice.

'I sais ye're on'y a little, weasened, yella', crooked, knock-kneed gintleman of a whore's bastard.'

'What's it to be, gintlemen?' asks Rea.

'John Palmer's daughter's expecting a wild one,' Keane says.

'So I've heard,' Rea says off-handedly, glancing at Simon.

'Blessed be the name of Mary, Virgin and Mother,' Golightly intones. 'Blessed be Joseph, her most chaste spouse.'

'Amen,' says Simon.

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'You have spent some time in America?' Buller is asking.

'Yeh.'

'Like it there?'

'Were ye up on Tamar, too, Keane?'

'Ha ha ha. . . .'

'What the hell are ye laughing at?'

Rea shifts uncomfortably, Buller sharpening his ears at the promise of a sexual topic.

'Ye might have been there yourself, Simon?'

'Couldn't possibly be the father, Ramstam avic, 'less I mailed a drop of me sperm home in a bottle.'

'That would have puzzled the customs—bacteria, handle with care! keep away from naked women . . . ha ha ha.'

'Give 'em the same again, Vincie,' Rea instructs, the rhythm of his spree breaking down.

'Okay, Davey,' Simon mutters absolvingly, 'I'd sooner father your get than many another man's.'

'Ye're not, Simon . . .?' Rea whispers.

'What do ye want to marry a parish whore for?' Keane asks, winking at Buller who has lost all track of whatever sense the conversation had.

'Haif, Mary! full of grace the Lord is with thee. . . .'

'Throw him out!'

'Lave him aloan. . . .'

'To proceed, my friends: we are here to crown a Caesar, but a Caesar without ambition, I sincerely hope. Potentially, a mighty Caesar and, I hope, always only a potential. All I will say is, in passing, that ambition is a very funny thing. It puts women into codpieces, men into bras, paranoiacs into parliaments, comen into councils, and generally, paves the right royal rocky road to hell.'

'Ha ha ha . . . well, after all you know.'

'Our leader, a Caesar without ambition, does not care where you put him. If he is pushed into a round hole, he becomes round; square and he is square. He is one of us—a simple and ordinary chap—a drifter, scrounger, cheat, liar, rogue, petty thief, and generally, goodfornothing.'

Laverty is laughing so much the tears are jumping out of his eyes.

'Pore bastard, the rats, it is. . . .'

'Our leader has no brains that count as brains, but he is of noble ancestry. His musty dusty cobwebbed line goes back to Adam. He is one of us—one of the poor, one of the wailers, one of the miserable, one of the guilty, one of the world's worst workers.'

'Hear hear!'

'His age is great. He has no age—he is ageless. He is the common dirty man, living the common dirty life, thinking the common dirty thoughts, doing the common dirty things, my friends, my dear and dirty common friends.'

Mother of God, I'm dying. For God's sake, cannot some-thin' be done. They're walkin' on me guts lyin' all over t'street. . .

'Ha ha ~~ya~~ ha. . . .'

'To Thee we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. . . .'

'Where was I? Yes . . . as I was saying. . . .'

' 'Tis ye shall have the golden throan, 'tis ye shall reign an' reign aloan, me dark Rosaleen.'

'Our leader is a good scout. Of that I am almost sure. At least, he seemed to be a good scout before he got these royal ideas. At this point, some of you may well ask: why have a king at all. We need a king for very subtle and non-existent psychological reasons based on an illusive and mistaken desire for unity, which is the exact measure of our own incompetence to exist as unpropped individuals. Kings have as much meaning nowadays as snowballs in hell, yet, it is quite a fashion to king a common man. It is a good thing to do, apparently, as the Irishman said, God rest his soul, when he tied the loose wheel to the cart and then blamed the ass for getting stuck.'

Water, water! God's sake, water. . . .

'Any offers for five ton af good Corran spuds?' Lavery is moving round the backs of the people shoring up the bar, asking his humble question. 'Any offers for fifty ton of proper Irish potatoes?' He pulls a small potato out of his pocket. 'Any offers, now?'

'Gagh . . . never ate the durty thin's!'

'Offers—fifty t'ousan' ton? T'wizards af Ireland!'

'Tell ye what t'do? Just ye, quietly an' respectably, fock aff. . . .'

'What'll ye offer me—make me a fair offer, now?'

'Take it away—garagh hell out'a here. . . .'

'Lavery, ye take all y'r bleddy spuds, wan be wan, lerge an' small, an' stick thim up between the fat fair cheeks of your bankrupt arse. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha ha. . . .' loud mad laughter.

'Do ye mind the time, Mary, we was sittin' on the style, side be side, me han' on your leg?'

Just a mouth of water, dear God!

‘Ha ha ha ha. . . .’

Silence. Everything stands still, all movement suspended.

A little gamin of a girl is creeping through the door, looking around with wide grey eyes, the black night-swollen pupils myopic in the raw glare.

‘Tamar,’ Simon mutters. ‘Listen, Tamar—no matter what ye do.’

It is Cathleen Angela Lavery, looking for her father. She sees him, going quickly to him, taking a sleeve-cuff and tugging. He twitches his nose, not looking down, suspicious of any extra movement not his own, impatiently patting at his cuff to brush the child’s hand off.

‘Daddie . . .?’

‘Wha . . .? What’s—what’s marrer. . . .’

‘Daddie! Mother says t’com hoam.’

‘Oh . . . himmm.’ He is embarrassed, shaking his head with annoyance, trying not to look around.

‘Ha ha ha ha. . . .’ the laughter bludgeons forth again.

‘Take them aff! Send them home to her—ye can drink just as well in your drawers . . . ha ha ha ha ha. . . .’

‘Daddie.’

He waves her away. ‘I’ll—I’ll—I’ll be home—soon.’

‘She says for ye t’come now, wit’ me. She says she’s not well.’

‘Here.’ He takes her hand and presses the little potato into it, closing her fingers over it. ‘Take that—tell her I’m comin’ soon.’

The child looks curiously into the palm of her hand, asking: ‘What’s it?’

‘Potato, child! Dammit, don’t ye know what a potato looks like? Our bread an’ butter. . . .’

‘Wid the oul pinch of salt . . . ha ha ha!’

‘Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God. . . .’

‘Mister Buller, it is a philosophic misconception and a moral untruth to say that all men are created equal.’

‘I can agree with that.’

'Oh, ye do? Lord, ladies and commoners, I suppose? An then Irishmen!'

'Ha ha ha!'

'I'm talking about the world, Mister Buller. Not your Buckingham Palace. An' not America with her common Caesars. I'm askin' when men'll recognize their own devine nobility and cease to ape the ways of anthropomorphic gods.'

'Put a cark in it!'

'Daddie . . .?'

'Shush—lissen. . . . Tell your mother I'll be home—soon. Tell her I've a buyer for t'potatoes.'

'She says ye're t'come now.'

'Our Father, Who art in heaven. . . .'

'T'potatoes . . . feller's buyin' t'potatoes—cash. . . .'

'Come on.' Cathleen Angela tugs stoutly, stubbornly, on the sleeve. Resisting, he looks craftily around. No one is heeding them. Meekly, leaning back from her pull, he allows the child to lead him out.

'T'Judgement now must first be nigh, 'Ere ye can fade, 'ere ye can die, me dark Rosaleen.'

Everything quickens. Yeo is flashing glasses, bottles and drinks with uncanny skill and speed. The laughter is roaring like an avalanche. Only the shadows are calm, the mime-master as unmoved as the chaste gull's skull on his baton.

'Buller,' Simon whispers, 'although my gammon doesn't suit your heigh-ho spinach, I find ye a reasonable man—one of the first men in six months whom I can get near.'

'Give us this day our daily bread. . . .'

'Didn't think you Irish were so frightfully religious?'

'Oh, yes—we worship the All Father Death. This is one of our small ritual immolations.'

'Interesting . . . very puzzling.'

'Yes, that we are still able to puzzle ye points to your lingering incompetence as internationalists.'

'Really . . .?'

'Yes. I'm drunk now on the narrow edge of time, but England seems to be one of the queerest places under the sun.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Don't laugh—we must try to understand each other. Evolving democracy plus totalitarian socialism alongside medieval knighthood, all of it under a deaf-mute monarch, that's England. Tell me, is it any surprise that we're puzzled?'

'Well. . . .'

'Ye see, these Vatican nationalists are instinctively correct. Logically, there should be no monarch in the western world who is not a Roman Catholic. When Charles got the chop, that was logical. It was the instinctive operation of Protestant logic. Ye'll remember the Irish fought t'put James back on the British throne. Do ye follow me?'

'Y-yes . . . yes, I do.'

'Ye're a liar.'

'Oh, now. . . .'

'Ye couldn't follow me 'less ye were reading the yards of thought between me évery word. But to cut a long story—it's Death. Ye see, if ye know how to read Irish history, ye can read the concentrated history of the western world. We are the victims of the application of hypothetical history—die dog or eat hatchet. Ireland was never meant to be a nation at all.'

'Oh . . .?'

'Och, it's not this bloody Celtic death-wish whimsey at all, man! The poetasters only took it as a romantically melancholy ploy—everyone likes to think about death in a comfortable sentimental way. I know—I die every day. I'll die tonight, dead as a knot in dry wood. I'm alive because I keep on resurrecting. Death, resurrection, death, resurrection—all the time. I'll die finally, like all men, when the resurrection power runs dry.'

'Oh. . . .'

'Ye see, the real reason for the Norman invasion of Ireland was a desire to experience the salt of death. England should give every Irishman alive a good pension.'

'Why do you say that, Simon?'

'I've told ye, man! We gave the precious leaven of the consciousness of death to the young choleric England. Look at Henry the Second? Just look at him—he was mad alive. 5,000 B.C. the Brahmin recognized Ireland as the island Temple of Death. The 1,000 B.C. Greek came to visit us. All the bloody cheap politics an' religion ever ranted an' prayed will never destroy our awareness of Death. England has become a very ignorant an' ungrateful country, no offence to ye.'

'That's all right—nothing personal.'

'Yeh, an' it's not personal. I see this—on that wall over there. I see Death there—he's like a great queen bee in swarm-time with all the workers hawking over her—adoring her an' Death an' Life no matter. I'm only tellin' ye this so ye can import back to England a few fundamental ideas. Are ye still with me?'

'Yes . . . yes, I am.'

'I doubt it but I may slip a few aphorisms in under the bloody drink an' ye'll wake up some sober morning an' think ye've thought them yourself.'

'Yes, Ha ha.'

'Just thought of a joke: John Bull, Irish bull, papal bull, Mr. Buller.'

'No—George.'

'Look. The Druid knew all about man an' animal. He gazed over his Irish fields, woods, valleys an' hills an' felt great blessing in his blood. Ye see, he was a Cain man. When he observed the animals, he experienced the emancipation into man-ness. He held the balance. This Godamned liquor is a plant extract with an induced alchemical animality. Shouldn't be called spirit—just soul. It makes us animals now but in the old days it helped us get away from the

animal because the animal was too damned close to us then, for human comfort.'

'Very interesting, Simon.'

'Oh, what's the bloody use. . . Ophion? Where's Ophion?'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . ' Keane laughs.

'It's his eel,' Rea says. 'It's in your hand, avic.'

'I believe in God the Father Almighty. . . ' Golightly is now mumbling the Creed, his head on his hands on the bar.

'What's wrong with him?' Buller asks.

'Shush.' Keane says. 'Ye're in church now, ha ha ha ha. . . '

'Ha ha ha ha ha. . . ' The operatic laugh faintly echoes like a response.

'He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead. . . '

'Somebody tell him t'stop. . . '

'Snot right, begod.'

'No, not right. No right. . . ' They follow the word as sheep go through a gap.

Simon finds himself still standing at the bar, his own arms round Ophion's paint can. Yeo, sweating by his recent tantalean exertions, wipes the moisture off his forehead with the damp cloth, frowning, moving reluctantly to Golightly.

'Let him alone!' Simon protests. 'He's doing no harm. A bit of religion, such as it is, can't hurt us.'

Yeo looks at Simon and back to the others, wiping his hands with the cloth. They murmur again as Golightly mumbles on, uneasy, some of them muttering about blasphemy.

'If it's good enough for a church, it should be good enough for a pub!' Simon calls along the bar.

'Time an' place for everythin', a smug voice says.

'Aye . . . aye . . . that's right! Aye. . . '

'Like the man said when he buried his wife,' says Simon.

'Ha ha ha ha. . . ' several laugh, led by Keane.

'It's the Apostles' Creed!'

'The Apostles had nothing at all to do with it. It's only a rather poor attempt to rationalize a mystery for the ignorant. No validity at all! None.'

'What hell do ye know . . . ?'

'What's he talkin' about . . . ?'

'Mat? Mat. . . .' Yeo is asking softly. 'Would ye like another drink?' Golightly slowly lifts his head, gazing into Yeo's moon face rising across the bar, tears running down his cheeks.

' 'Nother drink, Mat?'

He shakes his head, his eyes blank with self-inflicted misery, crossing himself swiftly, whispering:

'What's t'time?'

'Goin' on for half-ten. . . .'

'Oh.'

'My God, have I lost an hour an' a half? Not possible. . . .' mutters Simon.

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .' laughs Keane.

'It's twenty past ten,' Buller says quietly.

Golightly frowns, groping absently for a cigarette, coming back into his tight self, glancing swiftly about. They are all looking at him. He straightens his shoulders and lights the cigarette, coughing with attempted carelessness. 'Well, I—I—I'd better be going.'

He lifts a hand to Yeo with as much bravado as he can muster.

'Be seein' ye, Vincie. . . .'

He turns and commences a sedate and manly walk to the door. But his pace helplessly quickens into near-flight, blindly stubbing the cigarette against the door and jumping back from the scattered burn.

'Drink up,' Rea encourages.

'Drink. . . .' Simon whispers. 'Ophion—must water Ophion. Hour an' a half.' He upends the can and leaks out some water on to the floor through the hole in the lid, topping up with fresh water from a jug on the bar.

Buller and Keane look curiously, Keane asking: 'What's in the can, Simon?'

Simon shakes his head. There is something annoyingly offensive about this Keane. He could quietly choke him. He could gouge his bloody boozy eyes out with the balls of the thumbs the way they did in the old and wilder days when a man did not open his mouth unless he had something reasonable to say. There is something irritating about this Keane, a sort of cold ingratiating selflessness that is neither humble nor kindly and is a disguised arrogance and indifference; his body has become a jaunting car for addictions, denying its own essentialness, allowing itself to become shoddy and soft and lax for everything that does not serve its own cravings. Unlike Laverty, who was only a chronic drinker, Keane could be a straight dipsomaniac. What he has now fulfilled was the sour prophecy of his rancid school-boy odour: decadence! The riddle of man—maturity, majority, decadence, the beast way: decadence never inevitable but always accepted since it was always there, indulged in by a cultured and educated minority whom the inexperienced follow because neither Church nor State attempt to explain the difference between mere licence and true freedom. What a hell of a way to exist!

'To hell with it.'

'To hell with whot, ole boy?' Buller asks.

'You keep out of it!'

'I say. . . .'

'*Sláinte*. . . .' Rea interposes.

'Aye—to decadence!'

Keane winks at Buller. Buller shrugs. Were he a man, he would object. Still, he is a gentle man and tactful. Tact is a good thing if only the bloody English did not carry it to the edge of insanity, their precision minds meshed and purposive as clock-wheels, never losing sight of time. . . . 'Sorry,' he apologizes.

'Oh, all very interesting. . . .'

'Yeh—till ye can't do any more'n spy on it through a keyhole.'

'There was a case *in camera* last week,' Rea says. 'A feller was up for seducin' his ten-year-old daughter. . . .'

Keane and Buller lick everything up. Do they not know such things happen all the time, have always happened? Do they not know that nine parts of humanity have always wanted to waste their heritage in mere lust? Do they not know that Druids built stone temples to help save man from his animality, that eleven thousand years ago it was touch-and-go whether man would survive at all as man, or if he would ape his way through forests until the end of time.

'It was terrible,' Rea was saying. 'The bastard slit her open wit' a razor. What d'ye think of a man like that . . . uuugh!'

No, Davey, you're feeding them. You're feeding yourself. The time I found and lost the bronze spear. . . . The underwater island and the boat drifting away, leaving me in the broad middle of the lake, so excited about the spear I was: a lovely spearhead in bronze, fresh as the day it was forged, held safely in the healing mud for three thousand an' more years. I wanted to tell the man who had lost it that it was found; to shout hi there, I've found it!

Rea is telling another cleared-court story. It is the same story as before save that the names and unimportant circumstances are different. He talks as the pharisee, his eye always measuring the just distance between himself and such abyssal aberration. Keane and Buller are gorging his words shouldering each other off the trough. . . .

Ten inches long, it was, with two flukes curled like ram's horns. I put it inside my shirt and swam after the boat—foolishly, for as soon as I took my feet off the bottom I lost the submerged island. I was a poor swimmer and soon I was only keeping afloat, the boat quietly drifting on and the nearest shore two hundred yards away. I knew it was next to impossible and I began to endure a sense of remorse for having been

so careless with my gift of life, and one by one, I saw all the times I had with foolhardy bravado dared injury and death . . .

'They caught a feller wit' an ass. . . .'

'Odd bloke without one,' says Keane.

'He got twelve year. . . .'

'My God,' Buller says, thinking about the twelve years.

'An oul Jewboy got seven for fiddlin' wit' a lad behind a door. . . .'

After that I did not remember until I was lying on the strand, still making motions of swimming. The strand was not made of water-marbled stones; it was a wrack of broken bones. I wiped my eyes and looked about, seeing nothing in the gloomy haze but a small dark hump. In the distance there was a rushing of wind. It scared me. I crawled to this hump. It was a hut with a low door. I was neither lonely nor unhappy. I was content to wait as never I had been content before and I slept. . . .

'After t'Treaty we were on patrol in t'mountains lookin' for Irregulars. We raided a farmhouse an' heard roarin' in a cowshed. We found an oul hairy man with a cowtie welded roun' his neck an' him stark mad. We let the pore oul bugger out an' he went leppin' over t'fields shoutin', Glory be to God, Glory be to God.'

'Why?' asks Buller.

'Och, possibly some argument over land. . . .'

It was dusk when I woke. I stood up and felt the spearhead inside my shirt and I caressed it fondly in the half-light, weighing its subtle balance with joy and thinking about a haft for it—a slim hard tapered pencil of seasoned polished yew and I would have a perfect thing again, fit for a small-handed Celt. I was on the wrong side of the strand, on an island farm and I was chill now and hungry I went along the island shore to a narrower caol and found two old cot-sweeps. I tied them together with bits of fence wire and they carried me, kicking and drifting diagonally across the river.

'Aye, it was bloody rough, I tell ye. We were on the road three weeks, livin' out of pubs on buckshee whiskey. We

were living on our nerves. We could have bin ambushed, any time. Shoot first, ask the questions after, the officer said. He was a young buck an' mad as a weasel wit' drink an' fear. He was like wan, of them wild-west killers—killin' for the sake of it—firin' tommy bursts into cattle an' sheep. . . .

Feeling for the spear, I ripped at the shirt and searched about my body. I could still feel the form of it lying against my flesh, but it was not there. I had lost it. The lakes had taken it back again. I was sick with disappointment. I searched over the nearer strand and into the water as far as I dared and I kicked back to the other side and searched there but I never found it. I wept for the loss of it. I can still feel the form of it against my belly.

'Drink up, Simon, avic!'

'I'll never get over the loss of it,' he mutters.

They look at him curiously.

'It was a lovely thing. The work of a magical human hand. . . .' He feels the tears running down his face, the ghost of the spearhead lying on his belly. . . .

'What's wrong, avic?'

'It is the spearhead I lost,' he whispers sadly.

'Oh,' Keane says, winking at Buller. Buller has more sensitivity. He is sympathetic but only as a woman would be sympathetic and he is not a woman.

'Cheer up, Simon,' Keane is chuckling, full of his own turdy wisdom.

'Ye are just one large ignorant bastard, Keane. Ye always were an ignorant and insensitive bastard.'

'Ha ha ha ha, never mind, Simon!'

'Apart from the lousy administrations of the good Lord Succubus, don't ye ever dream?' Simon asks. 'Does not the sight of a lovely young girl leave a sweet lustless image of beauty in your mind, now? Does not your heart groan for the vision of two wild-duck skidding down the amporous dusk?'

'Do you ever write poetry, Simon?' Buller asks sympathetically.

'No . . . no faculty for it.'

'Drink up, boys,' Rea urges, 'we'll soon have to be movin'.'

'Drink up,' Simon mutters. 'Drink anything. . . . I've seen our General Maguire fortify a pint with equal measures of petrol an' methylated spirit plus a whiff of town gas.'

'My God.'

'An' although he never passed a school door, he could multiply two six-figure amounts in his head and give ye the correct answer.'

'Extraordinary.'

'No—just the peculiar state of affairs in this country. They were afraid to smoke at the General's wake in case he'd explode like a bomb. The coffin-bearers wore black socks over their boots for fear of sparks' an' all the mourners were asked to leave their matches on the graveyard wall.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Buller, as an unofficial plenipotentiary without portfolio from our subject island. . . . Ye see, Keane? Not drunk yet.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'From one, Buller, who has just returned from the first edge of hell, there is one thing the Englishman must recognize. It is the difference between our two tangled histories. Quantitatively, we Irish haven't a hoof to stand on. Qualitatively, the Sassanač sits on his bare backside in Piccadilly farewell Leicester Square under Eros, whom the pros now control, I believe.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .' Keane laughs. Buller smiles lamely.

'When ye return to London, it will nevermore be the same. But for God's sake, don't judge little Ireland by what I or any yahoo may say. Our word has as much validity as the Welshman's yes. Welshmen an' women just can't say no, Irishmen only ever manage to say mebbie, which is the same thing as tomorra'. The canny Scotsman nods an' shakes his head

at the same time. England has got where she is by the power of saying no at the right time.'

'That's interesting.'

'I dunno . . . don't suppose ye know what I'm saying, anyway.'

'Oh, I follow you.'

'Well, to continue to survive we have to know evil without becoming evil—to sleep with the dog an' rise without the flea. Nature is neither evil nor immoral—she is a-moral. We are the good, bad an' indifferent ones—the greatest things, potentially, in the entire universe. Next time ye have the chance, ye might mention that to the boys in Downing Street. They've been overlooking it since about eighteen-forty. Tell me, is the crêpe on the front door at Number Ten?'

'Crêpe . . .?'

'Aye, for oul Victoria, the pedantic Welf. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'It's not funny, Keane. If the Sassanaç fails, we're lost too. Our end will be the same as a soft swirl of waves over a sunk boat . . . but drink up!'

'What's your answer, Simon?' Buller asks. He is only testing the run of the river, not caring where it runs. . . .

'I can only give ye the Irishman's answer, unfortunately. I speak for no one but myself.'

'What's your answer, then?'

'Well . . . I will nevermore catch eels or any fish, nor will I take the life of any animal save to satisfy hunger. I will try hard not to kick a man in the face. I've a hunch that if we all stopped thinking about killing animals we might also eventually stop thinking about killing men. Give me another twenty year an' I'll tell ye if this is so. We can drink to it!'

'Drink to anything,' Keane giggles.

'Aye, like ye'd buck anything. . . .'

How many more drinks can I stand . . .? If me blood was

let I'd be jailed for running an illicit still. 'Davey? The lakes—I'm going back there with that girl ye coupled. . . .'

Rea frowns and shrugs, glancing at the others.

'Okay—I'll pay the seven an' a tanner. I will build us a little house an' we'll spend the winter days tending the fire an' waiting for spring. . . . Yeh, the best part of spring is the expectation of it. Best part of marriage . . . but that's denied me.'

'I mind once,' muses Rea, trying to turn the course of the conversation, 'I met an owl tinker. He was skinnin' a rabbit in front of his pore fire. An' d'ye know? He was the happy man.'

'I'd be a tinker tomorrow, Davey, if I didn't already know I couldn't be one . . . I met a right tinker lass last spring when I was wanderin' about looking for my idea of Ireland. She asked me to go with her.'

'Why didn't ye?' Keane queries.

'Because I'd only have ended up mating her an' little else.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Women always seem to think that when a man's at it, he should be satisfied. It might be different if a man could carry every other child. The freedom that tinker had she could never share for she didn't know she had it. I knew I couldn't take it from her. But I don't suppose ye can see that.'

'That's why ye have the way wit' the women, Simon,' Rea says, kindly and nostalgically.

'Only because I try to look over their heads. Most men make a habit of looking elsewhere.'

Simon is finding it impossible to sustain rancour against Rea. Impossible to sustain rancour against anyone—not worth the bother. . . .

The tempo in the pub is now sub-normal. Yeo is moving in slow-motion, his liquor thick and slow as honey, voices making words with long spaces between, the way men at the gate of death weigh their last few syllables. The customers are drifting slowly out, their bellies full or else their pockets

empty, their gossip spent. *Peace now: make peace, pray charity for all uncharitableness.* . . . 'Buller, I'm sorry I said that about Victoria.'

'That's all right, Simon!'

'I'm sorry, all the same. Living with her dead an' alive for so long, ye can't have any idea of the effect she had on Ireland. Her balmorality was just about the final straw on the ould Anglo-Irish ass's back.'

'Ha ha ha ha,' laughs Keane.

Buller is tight and bored now. He glances at the departing inebriates and then at his watch, makes his excuses and goes. Rea, hardly noting his departure, asks: 'Simon? How can the Irishman ever git shot of nationalism?'

He is wandering round the buoy again, picking up any curious flotsam he can find. . . . 'By the same methods as the dopey is weaned off dope. For any so-called Catholic an' universal church to mention race 'longside the name of God is pure blasphemy.'

'Ye should put up as a candidate, Simon.'

'An' lose the little I have—tryin' to explain that nothing save tyranny can ever come from the top, down? Democracy's like the ould horse, now—live on till ye get grass.'

'Doesn't make much sense to me.' The pseudo-pontifical Keane is taking a leaf out of Rea's drunken seriousness.

'I'm not describing what we are, in this shebeen, but what we can become in another thousand years, provided we're not entirely hobbled by then.'

'Boy, ye've gone a long way.'

'No, Davey. I'm here—tight—sprawling in the excreta of me own thinking.'

'A woman'll see ye right, Simon!' Keane encourages.

'Yeh—the ould cure-all. Even so, a man can raise the sexual act above the bull an' cow stage.'

'Ha ha ha . . . how? New positions?' Onan Keane.

'Och, there are such things like learning to think an' see together, laugh, weep. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha . . . you need a wife.'

'Yeh—but wives are hard to find. Like everything else, marriage has been whittled down to bare biological necessity—all the heartness lost. I dunno. In marriage there must surely be greater moments than repeated orgasms. That's as far as I'm able to take it this sorrowful night.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'Never mind, Ramstam, me boy. My knees are as weak as two blades of grass an' me stomach's in purgatory, but my head is curlew clear. My great difficulty—also my salvation, I'll never die with a bottle in me mouth.'

The party sags a little further. Keane bites his lip, raking through his ragbag mind for a fresh remark, loath to leave a flow of gratis liquor.

'Trouble with men like you, Keane, is that you've trained yourselves to look at life through the single view of the sexual ring. If ye weren't what ye are, ye'd be a celibate an' ascetic. . . .'

'What are your views then?'

'I have none—no hard an' fast ones—no bloody fixed peephole through which to spy the world's wounds. Davey, ye'll miss your bus.'

'Och, it's long gone. I'll get one of the boys t'run me out. Let's have wan for t'lane?'

'Aye, wan more, Davey. Always wan more. . . .'

Stand now on a hill, a high hill and see Ireland: Ireland sleeping and dreaming the never-remembered dream, the small farms and the little twisted houses, the lights in the windows, men and women yawning over the last spark on their hearths, the winds of autumn, laden with leaves: leaves I have loved dearly for their unfurled beauty, leaves I have feared to fall when winds were strong, tearing like seas among them; leaves I have worshipped as summer's clouds. . . .

'Ye talk as if there was little in the world that is any good,' Keane is persisting. Rea makes a warning face at him.

'Damned little—damned little that's not already contaminated. We've accustomed ourselves to contamination of all kinds. The very soil under^d us is sick an' now we're in the process of forgetting the man for the technological idea—the new paganism. When that happens on a world scale there's bound to be a detached sort of destruction. But t'hell with it. I'm tired, now.'

'Men still have faith!'

'Faith, is it? Animals are born with an awful faith.'

'We'd better be going. . . .' Rea looks at his watch.

Keane finished his last drink regretfully, asking: 'Where are ye staying?'

'The wife'll fix him up.'

'Davey, it would take more'n ten women to fix me up now.'

'Stay with me?' Keane suggests. Simon has finished with Keane. He has finished with Rea. But Keane has still something to say, to do. . . . He can't steady his sights with the liquor swilling under his feet.

'Be as well, Davey. When the owl woman hears two of us rolling into the kitchen she'll only be two times as sore. A bed is a bed an' I've no objection to a reasonably dry floor.'

'No need. . . .'

'The last one on me, Sergeant?' Yeo volunteers.

'No . . . not for me,' Simon declines. 'If I don't soon get rid of some of what I already have I'll be drunk for a month on the sound of me own belches.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .' Rea and Keane drink to Yeo.

Simon finds the sharp point of the gull-skull's beak in his jacket pocket. He takes it out, staring at it, surprised, not quite sure where he has seen it before. It invokes vague sights of rain-sweating cliffs over moiling seas, the careless gulls fearless in the violence of the wind.

'Here, Vincie, keep this—keepsake.'

Yeo takes the skull, snatches it, not looking at it, as a child takes a familiar toy. He nests it gently in his left hand,

arching his thumb and fingers protectively around it, his features quite changed by a close discovered anger. His thoughts are so intense that, instinctively, he closes his hand on the skull with the slight crunch of a breaking eggshell.

'So long, Vincie. So long, so long. . . .'

As Simon goes through the door Yeo is slowly opening his hand, gazing with dismay at the little ruin in his palm.

They part outside the door. 'God willin', I'll be up for a few days next spring, Simon.'

'Next spring—a long time. Let me crawl through the winter first. . . .'

The strong night air with the scent of the sea on it. The dark city, the voices, and the dying away of life: night now, a black boat on the Liffey that melts the lights, swans drifting heads under wings, anchored on a chain of sleep.

Scared now, defenceless by liquor, cling to Keane, take his hand and let him lead safely down the lane of sleep. They are crossing a bridge, Keane drunk-steady, stamping his feet hard on the ground to make sure they are on the ground: matey, now, no longer jibing, man to man. . . . 'I couldn't follow all that ye were saying to Buller?' Head in the air, announcing his respectability and sobriety to a few pale-faced shadows going past. O he is a poseur, actor. . . . But a bed is a bed is a bed. . . . I could sleep between the divil an' Paddy Reilly's cannibal sow. . . . 'I was only trying to say that the ancient Celtic thrust was to know the earth and to discover immortality. All mankind will have to look, sometime, to the land under wave. Now that the Red Indian has gone, we're the only folk extant with a direct link to the diluvian world. Wait a minute, I'm going to get rid of some poison—don't suppose the Liffey, with Guinness on her flank, will mind a drop of alcoholic vomit. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

Ha ha ha ha . . . the echoes: shadows and reflections, gleam and counter-gleam, swans' whiteness rocking a pale

reflection, slow dance of the rook-black river. . . . 'Hawrk!' He makes himself sick.

'Hawrk the herald. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'No good—only giving myself cramp. . . .'

'Want a few more?'

'God forbid—show me the face of sleep.'

'What have ye been doing with yourself?'

'Finding out about myself. I hold the secret of life.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'I'm slowly discovering a whole new world of pleasure in the experiencing of ideas against which whiskey, wimmen an' singing are poor things.'

'Ye should be a monk.'

'No. Because I know that true morality belongs in the market place.'

'How the hell are ye living?'

'Fishing for bread an' reading philosophy for the mind. I've discovered some terrible errors in the mind of man.'

He is only putting on; creeping under my wing, scratching me back, but never refuse to say truth, keep stating the positive. . . . 'Where's this doss house of yours?'

'Soon. What errors?'

'We're existing in a menagerie of illusions. We've damn near lost the right to continue to live. The old Bank of Hope which we used to think was inexhaustible is practically bankrupt.'

'Well . . .?'

'Ye mean, so what. Life is the theme of man an' man is the theme of life. Once we forget that we'll be in the full tide of religious an' political decadence where anything will go so long as ye wear the right badge in the right place. It scares the hell out of me. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'You should know these things! You're a teacher of the young.'

'Hagh! Little shits who'd seduce their grandmothers.'

'Just as ye were at their age.'

'Aisy! Ye'll wake the dead. . . .' Fumbling with his key at a fall broad door. Irrespective of the sign over the Georgian fanlight, the hotel is little more than a boarding-house permeated with the smell of stale frying pan, dim hall and shadows, church window on the stairway, its blue lights lit by the city. . . . 'Where's the piscina?'

'Ha ha ha . . . but move quietly.'

'Why?'

'Mightn't like it.'

'I'll pay the bastards five bob for half a bed, then. Where's the nearest toilet?'

'Upstairs—landing.' He tiptoes up the cheerless linoleum'd stairs, each tread faced with a brass lip that chinks on the heels, the odours changing with height, the stairs cracking like rotten sticks in a wood. 'Easy!'

'Snot me—walking on air. . . .'

Along a tall landing, brown-panelled doors with white delph handles and key-flaps, dead men inside sloughing off the skin of their day. Into a big bedroom, grey-lit by a street lamp, the moving curtain miming the shadow of a frightened man leaning in terror against a wall. Smells again: stale shaving-soap, sweaty clothes, pine furniture-polish.

'That toilet?'

'Second door—left.'

'Second door, left, make sure.' Third door including his or the second door. Listen. Tha's right . . . yea . . . Ah, singing cistern. . . .

Fix up Ophion: gloomy boxroom into bath-toilet; bath, bowl and basin confined in blood-dark wood. He sits on the toilet, watching the sullage lollop through his bilge. *'Tis ye shall have the golden throne. . . . King'd again an' bymebye unkinged by uisce beata; nothing dis-eased with nothingness. . . .*

The lid falls like a hangman's trap. Ophion. Piss-wiss-iss,

the water: flush clanking and sighing like a freight pulling out . . . whoo-hoo, whoo-hoo . . . shush. Sorry. . . . Ophion, me saint, me love, tuck ye up now. Have a good night's snog. . . .

'What *have* ye got in that can?'

'Me overnight necessities.' Keane in pyjama trousers, shaving for morning. His torso is well made but distastefully untaut, fat forming under the shoulder blades, no biceps; a hairless white-skinned body with a yellowish tinge, the pathetic nakedness of a man. What hell do women see, if they see at all? His body, mine, any man's. My God, the gaol of the body, the atlantics between men an' women.

'Want a wash?'

'I had a lick in the chamber of horrors.' He starts stripping to his underpants, the chill air tightening his clothes-sick body refreshingly; wonderful bed. . . . 'Night, Ophion. We'll sleep well. . . .'

Now I lay me . . . his long useless day wanders slowly through his mind; his mind is a country through which time flows, his mind a land, bearing the feet of men, voice, movement, turn, twist, event by event, unto the unforgetting sea of sleep. Swiftly sleep comes, bringing back the grey-green lakes and the birch-thatched strands: always the lakes, all through his life the lakes, bright winter days with a brittle wave chipping in a frosty sun: a world, a whole world where peace was, generous as a mistress.

Keane is saying something, his voice coming from afar. Simon wakes through the remembered sound of the water in the toilet and sees the familiar form, the young Apollo on the lakes, smelling his musty smell: the parish picnic when she almost drowned. . . .

'Tamar Palmer.'

'What about her?'

'I remember, now. Have ye been with her?'

'Under the circumstances, what d'ye expect me to say to that?'

'I'd like to hear ye say no. But apart from that, I'm thinking about the afternoon of the picnic when she fell out of Jerry Dickson's boat. Dickson was taking loads up the lake at thruppence a head—remember? It was a lovely Saturday in mid-summer.'

'Vaguely.' He is shaving round his jaw, grimacing and stretching the skin with his left hand.

'My memory is a sort of curse—I forget nothing I want to remember. This has been taunting me all evening. Just before—when the load was waiting for the next trip, you followed Tamar behind that big rhododendron—the one that looked like an enormous broody hen. It had white waxen flowers with rusty throats. When the boat came in they started looking for Tamar—her father had paid her fare. Thruppence, begod. . . . I went to find her. I came on you both—you'd one hand up her clothes an' the other in your pocket.'

'Ha ha ha. . . .' Open wide soaped mouth, blowing snow-flecks onto the mirror. He is remembering and makes great show to disguise his embarrassment.

'She was dead scared of ye. She was trembling.'

'Bet ye enjoyed the eyeful?' Keane queries with an odd dart of feminine viciousness that is like putting out his tongue. Simon is wide awake again. The old wave of resentment is living with him, intensified. But it is not so much personally against Keane as against the ruthless sequence of hitherto vivid but detached circumstances. 'No,' he mutters. 'I didn't. I felt sort of sorry for both of ye, like I always feel sorry when I see coupling animals.'

Keane chuckles, feeling over his face for unharvested plots of stubble.

'Ye know, ye are a shocking bastard. Ye were always a bastard, Ramstam. . . .'

What's the use calling him a bastard? All men are somewhat bastards. This particular one is sharing half his bed with me.

'Ha ha ha ha,' oiling his pinkish face with a lotion that smells of hazel bark, slapping his cheeks with his white hands as he yaws a little on his feet, mildly drunk: no fight in him—only the flaccid gentleness of indifference. . . . Let it go, let everything go—sleep now. The terrible, storm-drunk dream—O may I be blind, Death, not conscious at the bar. Fill 'em up, Vincie! Totem-pole Yeo, Laverty in horrors of death—the child with grey eyes. . . .

Keane cleans his teeth and wipes the basin, looking over at Simon and hearing his regular breathing; sleep revealing the handsome, rugged but regular features, their arrogance, gentleness and brutality, still the unformed features of a youth, the face of a young boy sleeping. He puts out the light, adjusts the window and gets into bed, lighting a cigarette and lighting his pallid profile as he draws in large gasps of smoke.

'Why do ye have to worry about the Palmer kid, anyway?'

Awake again. The same faint rancid cheesy smell plus scented soap, hazel and tobacco. 'Why? Spirit of the lakes, maybe. I dunno. Women have made images for better men than me.'

Wide awake, now, thoughts leaping round his head, quickened by alcohol the moment's doze refreshing as a night. Youth, death and all damnation carved on a cold potato with a knife of salt. . . . 'I'm going to marry her, if she'll have me.'

'Well . . . everyone to his own taste. She'd marry a pair of trousers, now.'

'That's just about my description.'

'Ha ha ha. . . . I'm thinking it's pity ye feel.'

'No. Not pity—pity never married anything. Pity's no more'n a platitude—it'll need another thousand years to become a motive, a thousand years an' several catastrophes. . . . No. It's because she has my youth. I'm not trying to miser youth, altho' it was a grand time to be alive.'

'Horrible time. . . .'

'Yeh, terrible time, terrifying. But, God, I had great youthfulness. . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha,' as a chuckle, surging bed.

'Nø, not sex—the body smooth an' hard. Do ye know, I could run ten mile then without a broken breath? Up hill an' down dale, leaping over hurdles of moon shadow.'

Chuckle. . . .

'Oh, I'm not trying to hold on to it. I don't mind growing up if I know how to keep from growing hard—hard an' lecherous like an owl goat.'

'Ha ha ha ha. . . .'

'If I talked till trumpet-time, ye'd never see it, Keane. Tamar was a sort of mirror.'

'What's it got to do with her now?'

'Ye can't shut time up into cells an' lock the doors. You're there, too.'

'Me . . . ?'

'Yeh . . . that time you were feeling her. I'd hardly noticed her before. Her fixation on me was partly due to your adolescent lust. But she was that sort—slow, gentle, mature, even as a child. Five or six years in adolescence is a big thing—a youth of seventeen is a man to a girl of twelve. The name—the only Tamar in the parish—the Bible story. She started to ripen when she was ten—little bumps on her chest. The boys were looking at her when she was eleven. Extraordinary—some powerful old sexual destiny—needn't have gone this way at all.'

'Maybe not so innocent?'

'Doesn't matter how. She could moth men like a candle although she hardly had an idea, herself. I felt it in her too.'

'Little slut.'

'Yeh, you of all people throwin' stones!'

'Ha ha ha. . . . Well?'

'No less sluttish than the other little parish bitches—the tight-assed crafty ones with the laugh. . . . Well, she came after me to the boat, the thruppence in her sweaty white

palm. They were shouting for her. It seemed as if they knew—that instinctive wolf-pack ability to clamp anyone in the parish stocks. I thought myself they were jibing her—us—joking us, her an' me, on being in the bushes. O they're primitive bastards, always scared they may cast a shadow over the borders of their own smugness. Tamar was upset—sort of dithery—made me wonder if you had actually coupled her.'

'Not with a little girl.'

'My friend, ye'd mount anything if ye thought ye'd get away with it. But that's your affair. They all settled themselves round the gun'lls of the boat. Tamar was squeezed in the stern. I never knew if she fell in or dropped in but there she was, clawing in the water, the boat going away from her, everyone shouting but keeping dry. I can still see her pale face like a lily on the black water. I knew Dickson'd have to make a wide sweep round—so I jumped after her although, God knows, I wasn't too good in the water myself. I don't know what happened in the water—seemed a hell of a long time until Dickson came back. He reversed, I think, the engine too weak for the loaded boat. He stalled in the panic, trying to keep the passengers sitting down. Anyway, I saw my whole life, right back to birth—that's not an uncommon experience. What I saw convinced me that life was not what people seemed to think it was—it was a tenuous continuity from the beginning—O thank God for that. No bloody hypothetical philosophy or religion can ever fool me . . . no, not if they showed me Holy Mary in a bathing suit. But that's only the half: Tamar had a similar experience, but she saw an earlier life. She was actually dead. She described it to me afterwards but she was forgetting it rapidly—it was too remote. Death . . . she was marked after that. The valiant boaters would have been content had she drowned and so closed the circuit. So she walked about the parish as one undead. . . .'

'Her father spoiled her.'

'I know—but I'm down deeper than that. Part of her was unspoilable an' I was the keeper of it. Dammit, I was only a gangling lad myself—what hell did I know then? Well, they dragged us back into the boat. I was sick and I can see Tamar's long black hair rat-tailed on her face and neck. Everyone knew something had happened when we got back—the blurred wall of inquisitive faces. They helped Tamar out—a slime-soaked water sprite. Her dress, a white one with green trimmings moulding perfectly her mature little body, everyone staring at her as though she were an unbaptized lake-witchling we'd picked up. An' ever after, she never had any secrets—frightening: the owl dark tribal consciousness—telepathic, somehow obscenely curious. She was sort of marked—the Death-wife. Not unclean, exactly, different. Her father pampered her—he was sort of in love with her. Old man's darling. . . .'

'What were you thinking then, yourself?' Keane asks, leaning over and squeezing out his cigarette. He has hardly been listening. He has been staring at the bed-end thinking out something for himself, drawing in large gasps of smoke everytime he came to the nub of his thoughts. . . .

'What does any youth think he thinks? I'd no experience to rationalize anything. But since I pulled her out an' since, in a way, I've always claimed the lakes as me own, I felt sort of responsible for her. I can work out most of the psychological implications, now. They could be reasonably true if they were the last word, which they're not. After that, she followed me about—appearing at places where I'd be likely to be. She knew my movements an' mind better than I did. Everywhere I went I was conscious of her, whether she was there or not. She might appear. God, she kept me out of many a dirty corner. She bloomed swiftly, but while nowhere near a saint, I held off her. I couldn't. . . . In the autumn before I cleared out she found me gathering hazel nuts in Rivary Wood. We sat an' talked, cracking nuts. She had heard I was going to the States. She didn't cry—the tears

just ran out of her eyes. I was sort of scared—feeling a second person inside your skin. I couldn't say anything. But I made her promise she'd never let a man across her till she was married. She wrote me letters for a year or so. I stopped answering her. I was getting a hold of my life. I wanted to be free. I loved Tamar—not as a lover. Love joins an' separates, lightens an' heavies—an awful loneliness besides being mixed up with a thousand other things. I tried to explain this in my last letter to her. But love has never anything to say—it acts, serves, no excuses, no questions. . . .'

Keane is dozing. Simon turns over and drifts into sleep, wondering if he might have married Tamar anyway, working her farm, parishman again, wild oats barned . . . no, he mutters, not parishman, not Irishman, man. Faces and forms swimming slowly past his eye, some of them standing still a moment and staring and then going on their way. Quite clearly, he sees the worried face of Gombeen Mister Laverty, the left eyebrow puckering away from the smoke of the nervous cigarette. It almost wakes him up it is so vivid and persistent. . . . He sleeps through the slow and archaeological land of dream: after a long time he does wake up, seeing Laverty's face again as he rushed through the thronged threshold band, the worried man's hands upon him.

A real hand is passing gently, tentatively over his hip. He is embarrassed and regretful, wanting fiercely to sleep. What to do? Keane is not really a homosexual—merely an over-sexed and degenerate male. He can feel the unfortunate man's gentle rhythm as he plays himself with the other hand while feigning sleep.

Simon makes a grunt and moves over to his own edge. The hand goes away. Sleep again until the hand comes back. It is odd thus to be womanized. O God how many weary and unwanting female rumps through time have felt the wandering hand; patient women, jailed by convention, waiting, taking the caress whether they needed it or not, finally submitting for the sake of peace. O what a hell of a thing to be a

woman, half the time only providing a suitable masturbative mime. . . .

But Keane's arrogance annoys him. The hand is becoming possessive, shedding its exploratory anonymity. Simon smiles suddenly to himself and reaches to the chair beside the bed where Ophion sleeps in his tin caboose, carefully fumbling for and finding the cold eel, waiting for the hand to come back.

Back it comes, round and round, tickly, under there. Carefully he moves the eel down, trying to gauge where the hand is, offering the slim and slimy head. The predatory fingers meet on the fish and investigate it. He can almost see them, their curious touch. He wants to laugh so much a knot comes in his belly. The fingers query the fish. They pull a little and, sensing the give, pull again. It must be a mighty odd experience.

The hand is nonplussed, unable to explain the phenomenon. It feels a little more: *O long an' slim, they say, goes too far in. . . .*

'Gagh!' Keane kicks back the clothes convulsively.

'What's marrer . . .?'

Keane is fumbling for the bedside light. Simon gets Ophion back into the can and blinks sleepily. . . . 'What hell's up?'

'Dunno . . . something in t'bed?'

'What, in God's name, man?'

Keane is hauling off the clothes, peering down at their feet.

'You were dreaming!'

'Dunno.' Keane rubs his right fingers and thumb together, smelling them suspiciously. 'Fish . . .?'

'It was a dream all right!'

'Like a bloody snake. . . .'

'Boy, you're in a bad way.'

'Wha' d'ye mean?'

'Hittin' the ole black bottle too hard.'

Simon wonders if it is worthwhile getting angry. He is

angry for the wide awakening, the whole terrible night brand new again, late voices laughing ha ha ha ha on the ricochetting streets. He has a horror about hitting homos. It is like bashing women about. They half enjoy being hit and hurt. There was the big Swede landlord who looked like a full man and was every inch a woman. He kept smiling in a fixed way with the blood dropping from his nose, the big soft bastard.

But Keane's sallow face is growing green, the shock upsetting his stomach that was probably touchy anyhow. 'Ye look slightly peculiar.'

'Lousy. Mixed the bloody drinks.'

'That's bad. I knew a guy who saw a whole herd of wet hippopotami in a pink pool.'

Keane makes a grumbling belch.

'If I were ye, I'd go to the toilet an' use the ole finger.'

Keane gets up and staggers to the washbasin.

'No—Gorsake not in here! Down the bloody toilet. . . .'

Keane stumbles out, his hand over his mouth. Simon gets up and tests his balance. It is reasonably steady again. He sits on the edge of the bed, a dark wave of melancholy washes over him, all his talk about Tamar coming back. God, call back time and marry an uncontaminated Tamar to an uncontaminated Simon, guard gamin innocence against a roaming world. . . .

That bastard Keane, that sonofabitch. . . . Had he not started groping about, sleep would be with me now. What was the sense of it? What was the sense in Tamar Palmer going wild? What was the sense of him sitting there on a boarding-house bed in the threadbare middle of the night in a hypocritical city? What sense trying to hock eels to a gaggle of ignorant bastards? What sense in anything at all? Simon, ye want your big head examined!

Keane finishes his hawking and heuking. The toilet sighs, squisses and rattles. He comes paddling back in his bare feet with bulging bloodshot eyes, his hands trembling as he

fumbles for a cigarette, snatching it out of the packet impatiently, lighting it and collapsing on the bed with a sigh.

Even with Keane's wrists handcuffed to the rails, it is impossible to get into that bed again.

'Where are you going?'

'Oh, just out for a little fresh air.'

'It's after midnight!'

'I know—nothing wrong with midnight air.'

'But the pubs are closed!'

'Good thing, brother.'

'Ye won't be able to get back—door's locked.'

'I'll play ye a tune on me oul flute under the window. Thanks for the bit of bed, such as it was.'

'Well, it's a free country.' He huffs-bluffs, pulling up the clothes.

He looks down on Keane lying there so comfortable and self-righteous. He could quietly lift up the foot of the bed against the wall as a farewell gesture. But then Keane might get tough and there's be a rumpus and all the owls and jackdaws would come out with their hair in curlers and their false teeth chattering in tumblers, quacking and hooting and calling for blood.

NIGHT now, a thousand candles on her charcoal cake and the strong ooze scent of the sea, frayed clouds racing in the city-glow before a south-west wind that slides a scrap of paper like a wing-wounded gull along the gutter. It dances on ahead, making its mime and poor dead gesture.

At Swift's Row he loses sight of the scrap of paper, the draughty wind taking a new direction. He searches for it and finds it again but it is tired now and does not want to dance any more even though he throws it into the air. Stubbornly, it blows back and clings to him like a moth. It has writing. It is a grocer's chit—an invoice for a packet of salt, a half-pound of margarine, a pound of plum jam, a pair of kippers and seven pounds of potatoes. He totes up the figures and they are correct.

Potatoes and potatoes, fish for a Friday, the diet of Ireland, no Joseph born to dream along this little Nile, this lost valley of the sea-sleeping Dublin dead. The tar-black river drowning lights and houses, and puffle-puffle-puffle-puffle goes a Guinness tug with a lighter of barrelled porter for the docks; washing along like a school of whales, the sleeping swans rocking on the swell, the water going slurp, slurrup to the stones, the sombre reflections rubbing in a dust of light through which men travail day and night, the tide their clock, thirst their master, dull misery their provider. . . .

Silence again, the settling water guggling to its shores, the puffle-puffle fading. Soon all is still until, with whine and droning bumble, a worker tram comes along O'Connell Street, a pensioner tram earning its keep by cleaning and repairing in the night. It stops at the end of one of Europe's widest bridges. Grey men get down, their voices weakly human and small in the night's vacuum. One kneels in a yellow pool of arc-lamp light like a priest serving some under-earth god, his acolytes around him with grey-green faces and shadow-shrouded forms: mumble, mumble, mumble

of mechanical prayers, the sistrum chink of tools. The man on his knees pulls dark goggles over his eyes, the helpers feeding him with worm-like cables, and he makes sight-hurting blue and sun-bright flames, the frothy sparks dimming all other lights, killing the stars, whitening the stark façades, cleaning the bridge balusters, silhouetting the workmen and expanding their titan shadows far and wide until they take possession of the whole haunted town.

They never notice him, the kneeling one working, the others looking past the crackling sparks to save their vision, their sunless faces—clean-shaved and tallowed in this false moonlight; grave faces—bonemen prowling the discontented night. They will run before the dawn reveals their nothingness. The welder's naked glare has blinded Simon, the complementary colours dancing in his sight. The great bulk of O'Connell's Monument glowers above him.

Dan O'Connell . . . mercy! Mea culpa. How the hell are ye now? Are ye not coul' an' weary up there? Erin hasn't moved save crabwise since ye emancipated her. . . .

'Hi, you!'

The workmen look up with their chalky faces.

'Dan O'Connell, it is! Ye mind Dan, now?'

'Aye, ha ha ha. . . .'

'He was a fine man. . . .'

'That's right, ha ha ha ha. . . .'

Drunk still, whiskey thy memory lingers on. A very potent thing it is: strange, a few small mouthfuls and a man is kinged or killed. . . .

He stands at the place where he met Tamar's uncle and remembers all that was said, seeing the mean nervous man again but only slightly feeling the resentment, as though the man's ill-thought actions were his own, now, and would be buried secretly in a hole in the night of the mind. Not forgiveness—forgettingness, secondhand forgivingness. . . .

He tickles his throat with a finger and tries to regurgitate, but nothing gives, the dry cramp back in his belly. Tamar!

Wiping a hand over his clammy face, he feels his tears flowing, sorrow confused with a primitive jealousy, a knot of jealousy that is like the twist in his stomach. He is surprised, for, while weary enough, he is not particularly sad in himself: he is sad for Tamar. He has no fear in himself, only a sadness that is like a fear and to be sad for things is worse by far than remorseing mistakes completed. But he has no fear, as fear. He knows he will live until he dies. . . .

I'm a hard, callow and unthinking bastard. I could have taken Tamar in the spring and made her way easier. I could have fought back against parish tribalism. I could have said: keep your dirty vicious minds and tongues off Tamar Palmer for she is my woman now, big belly and all. . . .

But, dammit, I didn't see it that way. I didn't come home to Tamar Palmer. I came home to Ireland, all possessions in a three by two valise, everything whittled down to a few essentials. It was Tamar who first dissatisfied me and now, when I thought I'd found a few bare bones of satisfaction, she dissatisfactions me again, just because my heart is selfish—soft and cowardly-hard, the Uncle, Rea, and Keane all one in me and none contented. I am an archetypal bastard, scared of me own sins an' scornful of others'. But God O God, I can't let that girl be skinned in a butcher-parish. I owe her a debt even if it's only for steering me into oceans of dis-ease. Without her influence I can see I would now be nailing paint off walls an' screaming at warders.

God save me, a man can do awful wrong by not doing anything: hungry an' ye fed me not. But it may be said for me I never thought about it until this unbegotten time: it may not be said against me that I thought about it and then laid it by as too uncomfortable: but it can be said against me I acted on the dirty law of the common stone. Tamar and meself could have managed all summer. All I needed was someone to drift a boat while I set an' lifted the line: roof, bed, hearth, kettle, two plates, two cups and a pail for spring water; slow stately nights, dark wings up in star-

silence and the rising of a fish. . . . Why did I not think of it before? O Christ little brother, am I to live through ten spent lives in order to get at the^e one I'm supposed to live?

Yeaah! Yeaah! Yeaah! Har har har har—an insomniac gull. The worker tram goes on with a clank, whine and a protesting bumbling over points, spitting down a rain of blue sparks. . . . Horn-dry hood-sounds, a rout of jostling bodies, a man with a lamp hurrying ahead of a herd of young cattle, a man behind with a red lamp, two dogs wolfing on either side, blowing beasts, big staring faces rushing nowhere, Cain-cursed by some terror that drives them through this claustral city-night, slipping and sliding on glass-faced cobbles, a tight stampede, horn to horn, side to side, boxed in.

Chuff-chaff, chuff-chaff, stagger and trot, slip-slop, loose horn-heels on the hard cobbles. . . . O, who comes walking in the loneliness?

A tall and piebald figure in the old homburg: Laverty it is, still searching for a drink. He wears a shirt and pants, the shoes unlaced by the sounds of his walking. He has a rosary in his hands, mumbling as he walks, teetering sometimes on heels and toes.

' . . . t'blest Michael t'archangel, t'blest John the Baptist, t'th'holy apostles Peter an' Paul, t'our holy patron Patrick an' t'all t'saints that I have sinned exceedingly in t'ought, word an' deed through me fau't, through me fau't, through me most grievous fau't.'

'Amen,' whispers Simon.

Laverty stands in the shadow by the wall, finishing his Confiteor. Then, half-crying, he repeats the Lord's Prayer. Maybe he thinks he is going to bed. Men have thought they were going to bed in queer places. An Irish bum, drunk on canned heat, went to bed in a movie lobby, swearing that a photograph of Garbo was a picture of the Virgin at the end of his bed at home. Big Dick Kennedy did it every monthly spree at exactly the same place on the road, so his wife

always knew where to find him, hanging his clothes carefully up on a bush, putting his false teeth on a stone by his head and lying down to sleep peacefully in a wet ditch.

But Laverty puts his two hands on the top of the wall and hangs his head between his arms, saying over and over again: 'May Gold help me. May God help me. . . .' Then he stands straight as he can, taking off the homburg and putting it on the wall and tries to get on to the coping, his toes slipping their hold and dropping him back so he sits down on his behind. But he persists, grunting and praying and breathing heavily, until he manages to heave himself up and lie across the coping on his chest, kicking out his legs like a frog, now saying a Holy Mary, his voice rising to a hoarse panic as he sees the far dark water.

Simon moves closer in case he does decide to go on. Laverty swims on the coping, staring down at the kaleidoscopic water. He is not going any further but wants to convince the perished individual in himself that he could go on if so inclined. Simon knows exactly how he is feeling. He is sort of squaring up to Death so, anon, he may convince himself he has dared the invincible and lived. Were he going on he could swing his legs around and slide off. Simon grabs the two bony ankles. Diverted from his mock-intention, he stiffens and tries to look back, saying with paradoxical annoyance: 'Let go of me! Let go.'

Simon laughs. On the doorstep of his own death, the man is scared for his safety on the earth he is expecting to leave, while at the same time he wishes to put up a good show to prove his fatal decision.

'I'll let go if ye like.'

'Let me out!'

He kicks in wild panic at the strange hands, a shoe falling off, dropping on the cobbles with a soft thud, his white sockless foot flippering in the air. Simon can barely hold him and knots his fists in the legs of the pants.

'Come back to Erin, *a míúirntín!*'

'Let me out!'

'Come on.'

The pants are slipping. He locks an arm around both ankles and leans back. Lavery has a good grip on the further edge of the coping. He knows he is not going to die but is unsure that the street side of the wall is not as hazardous as the river side.

'Lemmie out!'

'If ye don't come down I'll damn well shove ye over!'

'Let go.'

'Okay.' He shoves forward.

'Jaysus, I'm goin'!'

'Make up your mind, then.'

He lets go and Simon pulls him down, sliding him through his arms. It is a pyjama jacket, not a shirt. It telescopes up round the white naked body to the spaded shoulderblades. Spluttering and breathless, he waves his arms, threshing about as though he were in the river, miming all the antics of a drowning man.

'Relax for God's sake,' Simon whispers. It is like struggling with Tamar all over again. He is sick in the stomach, receiving all the man's wild fears into himself, the open-mouthed, false-toothed, distillery breath almost making him puke.

'Take it easy. Sit down an' get back your wind.'

He pushes him down on the ground, against the cold wall, and recovers his shoe, dropping it at his feet and sitting down beside him.

'Do ye know? I feel like givin' ye a leg up an' jumping in with ye.'

'May t'Almighty God have mercy on me, forgive me me sins. . . .'

'Well, that's one way of looking at it.'

The rosary lies in a neat pebbled heap on the stones. Simon reaches over and hands it to him. 'Here, talk to that. Gives ye a purchase. . . .'

The white and workless hands with their long numb

fingers feel over the dumb beads, the body slumped against the wall, the white foot and the black foot stretched out, the pyjama jacket flapping over the trouser-band. He starts to blubber. Simon waits. The blubbering passes and he talks incoherently: 'Aye, five ton of the best. Cheap, now? Quick sale . . . good ware.'

'Ye haven't managed to sell the spuds, then?'

'Cheap, now? Make me an offer,' briskly, the head nodding cleverly.

'I don't want the bloody spuds.'

'Customer wants cash. Make me a quick cash offer, now.'

'Five pound.'

'Five? Five! Godsake, man! Five . . . have a heart.'

'Six, then? Although I'll be in jail for receiving.'

'Six? Ye're wastin' time.'

'That is true enough! Ye put your price on them.'

He frowns an important face, licking his lips, not wanting to disclose his figure in case it is lower. Delicate moment, might get more than he expects. Start high, come down. . . .

'I tell ye, I'll make a swap—five hundred eels for the five ton of spuds?'

'Eels . . . what eels?'

'Things like this.' Simon fishes Ophion out of the can and dangles it before him.

'Aaaggh . . . snakes! Take it away from me!'

'Sorry, I forgot.'

'Look at them! Aaagh.' He squirms along the cobbles, lifting his behind on his hands and jolting sideways quite rapidly, kicking out in panic.

'Ye're all right, man! There hasn't been a snake in Ireland since Noah. Take it easy.'

He lies down, pulling the pyjama jacket round his neck, his whole body shaking as with ague. Simon pats his back. . . .

'There, there now! They'll soon be going away. They never hurt any of us yet.'

'Who-oooo, who-oooo.' He breaks into great dry shivering sobs, gulping down breaths like a choleric child who has pushed too much air out of its lungs, frightening itself with the shortage.

'There, now. They've gone. Sit up.'

'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners. . . .'

'Aye, we surely need a prayer; brother. I have a few original ones I keep for extra-special gloom.'

'Bridie? Bridie. . . .' He looks into Simon's face like a little boy, wonderingly, gratefully. The motherless man.

'God, don't look at me like that.'

'Bridie, I'm sick. . . .'

'All right—we'll get ye home to Bridie.'

'I can't stand it. . . .'

'Few of us can, avic. Yet, somehow, we do.' He shudders in a long breath and relaxes a little, dropping his head as though in profound thought. Then he gropes over the chest of his pyjamas, looking for a watch and asking brusquely: 'What's t'time?'

'Night, brother.'

He looks up, asking, amazed and incredulous: 'Where am I?'

'Sitting on your backside on a Dublin quay.'

'Oh.' The information seems to satisfy him and he returns to his thinking for a little while, until, suddenly, he asks again: 'Where am I, in God's name?'

'To give ye a straight answer in the name of God is beyond my present powers.'

Laverty turns slowly and looks craftily.

'Ah, that's more normal, now!'

'Who're ye?'

'Who are ye?' says Simon.

'Me . . . oh. Where am I?'

'Ye don't know who ye are unless ye know where ye are? Ye're in Dublin, shall we say. Now, do ye know who ye are?'

'Me? I'm Vince Lavery. Lavery—I've a business here. Well known. Well known man, I am.'

'Yeh . . . but what about headin' for home, now. Vince Lavery? Look, ye are practically all right now. Ye are only acting up.'

'What t'hell are ye talkin' about?' pugnaciously.

'Why don't ye go home to bed?'

'Bed.' He shrugs, shrinking again, shuddering a breath, wiping a hand down his face.

'Don't start up again. So far as I can see, ye are only a small bankrupt, but your bloody small pride won't let ye declare it. If ye were a big bankrupt, it'd be different, but there's nothing so mean an' sordid as a little one. Face up to it, man, an' start over again. The roads are still free.'

The inward, dull crafty look is increasing in his eyes.

'I wonder what would have happened had I not been so handy?'

'What are ye sayin'?'

'They do say there's a special place in the great hereafter for bankrupt suicides. They say that murder, suicide, an' bankruptcy are all in the same box . . . dunno, meself.'

He is thinking again, scheming again, trying to fiddle his way out of this small impasse, unwilling even to declare his bankruptcy to Simon. He claps his pyjama jacket pockets for cigarettes, sliding his hands over the jacket where pockets should be, nonplussed that the hands cannot find pockets.

'Here.' Simon hands him a cigarette. He takes it, wetting it with his tongue and tenderly embracing it with his lips. Simon lights it for him and gets up for the homburg, clapping it on his narrow, grey, thick-thatched head. 'There—ye're almost the man ye were yesterday.'

'I can't stand it.' He adjusts the hat to the canted position. He tries to get back into the safety of his hysteria.

'Dammit, Lavery, we're all bankrupt!' Simon shouts, enraged at him. 'Ye're going backwards the same way as ye went forward. . . . Come on!'

‘Where am I?’

‘Agh, wake up! Ye are steppin’ down O’Connell Street with a fag in yer gob an’ a feather in yer black hat.’

‘Aye . . . he he he he. Feather in me hat. He he he.’ He shakes himself with laughing until he has to cough, trying to keep the cigarette between his lips and coughing deep in his chest, then flicking the pyjama jacket swiftly with his knuckles. . . .

Simon hunkers down before him: ‘Tell me, if ye can, now. What did ye feel like when ye were walking the plank? Did your life not start sorting itself out?’

‘What plank?’

‘What did ye feel like when ye arrived at the end?’

‘What are ye sayin’?’

‘What did that ole debbil Death smell like, now?’

‘Jaysus, ye’re crazy!’, self-righteously, as though the judgement exempted him from contamination.

‘I know that. We’re all that way now—waiting for the river to dry so we can sneak across. Several times I have considered your aborted method. The only thing to stop me was the idea that while I’m not much good to meself, any more, I still might be of some use to somebody else.’

‘What are ye sayin’?’

‘I’m only askin’ ye, if we’re sober enough, to tell me some of your general last impressions. It’s such a final sort of effort that a man has to be sure it’s going to be efficacious, so to speak. Most people run a mile from the idea of death. Very few of us face up to it, like ye.’

‘Ye are drunk!’

‘No.’

‘What in God’s name are ye sayin’ to me?’

‘Ye are a sanctimonious oul bastard, Laverty, ye know, no spite intended. Dead crafty, ye are. Dublin crafty. But don’t ye come the oul badger with me, now.’

Silence. Laverty looks at him shrewdly, head on side, the start of an ingratiating smile on one side of his mouth.

'I've seen ye somewheres?' Full normal dodgery is back in his voice.

'Sure! So what? I've seen ye an' your three kids an' your pupped wife.'

'I can't stan' any more. . . .' Impatiently fisting his thigh.

'Okay.' Simon mutters, standing up. 'She's all yours. Tie a stone round your feet an' ye'll stay down. It's quicker. Ye fight, they say, ye fight like hell—wanting t'get back to what ye thought ye couldn't stand. Ye can't stand it there, either. Tell Saint Peter I'll be seeing him.'

'Wait, wait. . . .' He catches his trouser cuff, looking up and asking: 'What'll I do?'

'Go home an' get into bed.'

'Can't . . . can't face it any more.'

'I'm sorry for ye, Lavery, I am.'

'I knocked her—an t'head,' ashamedly.

'My God. Ye haven't killed her, have ye?'

'I dunno.'

'God save us. . . . Is that why ye were getting up on the wall? Ye'd best go back an' see. What did ye hit her with?'

'Me fist—in t'face.'

'How often?'

'On'y once. . . .'

'That's something.'

'Never was a marryin' man. . . . Me father intended me for the priesthood—I didn't make it. I got married. I had no money—the wife had. Now, I've spent it all, may God help her. I've wasted her money on her.' He dry-sobs brokenly. 'I tell ye, I can't stand it! Terrible, terrible . . . ah ha ha ha ha ha. She—she niver says a word. Jus' waits an' worries.'

Simon waits till he stops.

'What's wrong with your priest? He's the man for the job.'

'Agh. He'd only skin me alive.'

'Ye pore bastard. I don't know what the hell ye can do.'

You're a bust gombeen an' I have no gombeen experience at all.'

'What'll I do?' He wails with a cracked falsetto cry, covering his face with his hands.

'Aye, as usual, ye want the orders. Not even a lance-jack of your own existence.'

'God forgive me, what'll I do?'

'Well, ye *could* give what's left of your goods to the poor—your poor creditors! But don't ask me. I don't know. Surely there are plenty of holy willies here to advise ye. Go to your priest. Tell him—it's his job. Have ye to go to jail as well?'

'No,' he mutters, shaking his head. 'But—but Father Lavin'll murder me. I've disregarded all his advice. He's a very severe man. . . .'

'Well, find another one. Don't ye know any more?'

'Aye, mebbie.'

'Who?'

'Father Power—a secon' cousin of mine.'

'Where's he live?'

'Not far, but he'll be in bed.'

'Come on, then. What's a priest in bed against a soul in torment?'

Laverty rises stiffly, his ankle and knee joints cracking, pinching the burned butt from between his lips, holding it in one hand while groping helplessly about himself for another fag.

'Here—light up again.'

He takes the fag automatically as though he had himself produced it, lighting it off the old butt, knuckling the jacket several times to remove any ash, then fixing the homburg firmly on his head. They set off together, striking away from the river into the labyrinthine gloom, Laverty turning left and right and Simon trying to memorize his way so he can return.

Simon laughs.

'What are ye laughin' at?'

'Just thinking which of us needs a man of God the most.'
'Hagh! You're a bleddy heretic, ye are. What are ye doin' wanderin' round the streets in the night?'

'Keeping bastards like ye from leppin' over walls.'

'What walls are ye saying?'

Silence . . . the shadows dodge the light and listen flat against doors, faces pressed against window panes, picking up their footsteps and throwing them back.

'Listen. Father Pow-er.'

Power, ower. . . . Echoes!

'I like echoes, Laverty.'

'What'll I tell Father Power?'

'Tell him. . . . I dunno. First thing that hits your mind. Say it's a fine night, Father.'

'What'll I say about ye?'

'Ye don't have to mention me at all. What have I to do with it?'

Laverty stops.

'What's the matter?'

'Don't want to go that way. Feller owes me money. . . .'

'That's all right. Better be owed than owe!'

'He makes faces at me.'

'He can't make faces in his sleeping.'

Down the street Laverty goes, moving quicker as they pass another gombeen warehouse called Mahaffy & Sons, General Merchants.

A door bangs and he jumps, starting a shambling trot.

'Hold on! We're not in that great a hurry!'

'Don't want t'see him.'

'I wonder how many men there are in this burg who spend most of their time keeping out of sight of each other?'

'Here 'tis. . . .' He stops at a tall dark house. They stare over the vacant curtained windows. Laverty is whispering hopefully: 'He's asleep.'

'Men of God are supposed to have good consciences.'
Simon goes to the brown door and clangs the brass knocker,

then hauls at a brass bell-knob. The babel of sounds bruise through the inner silence and rattle up the street. For a half-minute there is no movement. Then an upstairs window opens and a thick voice asks who is there.

'Father Power?'

'Yes—yes. . . .'

'Come down, Father, an' we'll tell ye.'

'Aisy—don't shout. Can't it wait, now? I have an awful toothache.'

'I'm sorry, Father, but there's a man here at the door of death. Two men, b'it one of them can hold out.'

'Oh,' asking, whispering, after a short silence: 'Shot?'

'No. Just half-shot. But in danger of losing the mortal possession of his immortal soul if ye can't relieve him.'

'All right. . . . I'll come, I'll come.'

Slow steps down the stairs and a groundtone of breathing and complaint, groping for a switch, and a slice of light falls across the step as Father Power peers round the door, a black muffler tied round his head, a man much older than Lavery. . . .

'Come in, come in.' The big fat hand waves impatiently.

'Who are ye?' He can only see Simon.

'It's not me, Father. It's Lavery, here.' He pulls up the lagging Lavery.

'Vincent Lavery? Where is he? What's the matter with him?'

'Here he is. He'll tell ye the whole story. . . .' Simon pushes Lavery towards the door.

'Vincent? In the name of God! Why are ye about like that?' He makes a cross-sign.

'Potatoes, John. . . . It was the potatoes. . . .'

'Come in, come in! What are ye up to? Who's this lad?'

Lavery is still hanging back. Simon shoves him forward, tapping his own head with a finger to brief the priest who holds his aching jaw and nods.

The chill air makes Simon move smartly as he heads back to the river. A church bell chimes a single solemn one, the iron rings of sound radiating outwards: *one o'clock and all is crackers: only one—six solid square tombstone hours yet—my God.*

The streets flow as tributaries to the river. The Liffey eases him, so smooth and strong it is, making its quiet way. He can see it, not as a glorified sewer ruled by hardfaced houses, but a virgin stream still, starting at some rock's anonymous crack, gathering strength through the land's green heart, taking the marriage of freshets and drains, resting in silent pools where the muscled trout rise and shatter the water like a fist through glass, trees tranced in self-admiration, cattle drinking, an otter astride a salmon. . . . He would like to walk up the Liffey, round by round and curve by curve, tracking time.

Boom-m-m boom-m-m, two bells mourning time, intoning night with a brazen prayer. An hour has dozed swiftly. He must have slept on the river wall.

Chill and hungry, Simon crosses the river, skirting round a big church, walking swiftly to keep warm, finding himself in silent Georgian slums; the carnivorous smell of the poor—strange how they can make even noble architecture tawdry. A child wails high in an attic, a pure cry of terror, the purity shaming him. New life bursting through filth. Children born and being born. Mrs Laverty whimpering her worries to her kicking belly. Tamar weeping in a stepmother attic, marking off the days in a grocer's calendar. No, bastardy is not in the bearing. The natural child is bastardized by contaminating life, each child born with a dream of human excellence.

The cry has frightened him, a hot knife in his dull brain: his own lost-call ailing through his own time; the cry of the suffering city, remembering some old violence consummated in adamant night: cry, then, cry on, echo on and on in the wild-night wind, break penitential barriers, touch the

hang-dog traditions with a finger of fire and make a flame to salute the morning.

'Die dog or ate the bloody hatchet!'

Hatchet, hatchet, hatchet. The echoes scorn and whisper.

My own voice, the voice of any man, the knockle of wheel on axle, doorcreak of a tholepin on a boat, or a stone to a stone: ache, emptiness, unpeace. . . . O Christ little brother where am I? Neither drunk nor damned but still damned near drunk, looking at life through the bull's-eye end of a bottle. . . .

'Gottafag?'

A voice beside him with an edge of hackle-hoarse insolence that immediately makes him wary. He sees a man round his own height and age, muffler looped about a shirtless neck, the ends bundled under a holed sweater, cap jaunted over an ear, and the acrid odour of crusty clothes. Simon is aware this man has been observing him a long time from under the cunning visor of the cap.

'Yeh, think so,' he mutters coolly, putting a hand in his pocket, his eyes going about the fellow in case he has company. He finds a loose cigarette and holds it out in his left hand, not moving: 'Here ye are.' There is a shoulder throw and maybe he knows it. The counter is a twist and a fall and a kick with both feet. . . .

The man moves a foot nearer, arrogantly, and takes the cigarette, asking for a light.

'Ye wouldn't like me to smoke it for ye? Or spit out for ye?'

'No. I c'do dat meself,' tucking the cigarette behind an ear.

'Do ye really want a smoke, now, or do ye just want to discover who I am and if I'm scared of ye?' Simon asks slowly.

The man twitches his neck and sniffs, clearing his nostrils and spitting out. 'Ye've a helluvalot t'say f'r y'rself.'

Suddenly hating the man, not as a man, as a fixed symbol

of threat and violence in the haunted night: 'I'm only trying to avoid bother. I'll give ye two half-crowns if ye can put me down an' hold me down.'

'Ye're a bloody big feller. . . .'

'No bigger 'n ye, brother. I just don't want any trouble this night. Now go ye home an' smoke that fag in bed, like a good chap.'

'Y'r bloody shmert!'

'Wouldn't be here if I were. I've nothing agin ye personally, but I just can't thole bastards like ye going about the night frightening people.'

'Oo-er-ye callin' a basthard?'

'You! You pore bastard, you pore unfortunate poverty-stricken bastard. I know how ye live, how ye half-starve, how ye sleep maybe twenty to a room. I know. I don't want to make your life any more bloody-well miserable than it is already.'

'Whot ar'y' talkin' about?'

'You . . . it's not your poverty that makes ye vicious. It's your acquired viciousness that keeps ye poor. If ye had as much imagination as ye seem to have bare guts, ye'd get t'hell out of this dump. But ye never will—ye'll bloody-well die here. I could tell you where to find fresh streams an' blue hills, but ye wouldn't believe me.'

'Janey, y'r fockin' crackers!'

'Yeh, I know! But you're not—you're perfectly sane. Ye are so godamned sane ye'd knock a guy down for his corns. I wouldn't. But ye would only get three months in the bughouse. I'd get certified for life.'

'Oo's bughouse?'

'No matter. If I could tell ye rightly, ye'd listen. If I could see ye in all the magnificence of your divine manhood—as a full an' fearless human being—then ye could also hear me an' I could hear ye too, an' we'd be friends.'

'Y'r not a phriest?'

'No.'

'Oo are ye?'

'If I knew who I was, I'd also know you, an' we wouldn't just be distrustful voices in this suffering night.'

'Y'r'e wan af thim bleddy heretics. . . .'

'Yeh, there it is. It's not heretical to threaten? To waylay an' club the back of a head—that's only human, like the man said to the wife when he kicked her three times in the belly. God's chosen people.'

'Lave me beee! Lave me beeeeah!' A woman's wail calls loudly, suddenly, a raw wound in the lamp-lit gloom. A lost and sinking voice, a female lamentation against assault, an unavailing plea for mercy from the merciless male loin. Simon shivers, the child-cry coming back, matured and terrored by experience. The stranger tenses, listens, turns and goes off with a light trim downheel step.

'Who goes . . .?'

A man staggers awkwardly after the woman, waving wild impatient arms, calling hoarsely, intimately: 'Wate! Wate, there. Dammit, wate. . . .'

The woman sees Simon and scurries over, shaking her head against the man's demand. He comes after, trying to grab her arm. He would be more gentle were she not so wild.

'Wate! Have sinse now, Dammit!'

'Lave me beeeeah. . . .'

The wild wail rises again, gulling from her throat as she shakes him off and cuts across below Simon. The man sees him and retreats to shadow. It is Cathlín, the old paper woman.

'What's the matter, Cathlín?'

She has changed now, the sybil night has changed her: no longer undefeated rebel, no longer loud protestant cursing civilization's cold mechanical overflow. She stoat-slurps now, moving through the night with bent body, seeking shadows. She makes no effort to recognize him.

'Cathlín! Cathlín, what's wrong. . . . It's me, remember?' hot grief in his voice for her.

'Fockaff.' As a mole on loose loam, she burrows into the shadows.

He cannot understand. He takes a step after her. 'Cathlín?' She glances back over her shoulder with a female-hunted gesture that wrings his heart.

The man stands watching. Full of sudden anger, Simon goes over. Cathlín flits on down the street. . . . 'What's up?'

He is no more than thirty; thickset, pleasant-faced, cleanly-dressed, country suit and dark topcoat, new grey soft hat.

'What's up wid ye?' he comes back arrogantly with a thick smell of stale drink. By his brogue he is not a Dubliner.

'Why can't ye leave that oul woman alone?' Simon answers.

'What is it to ye?'

'What I want to bloody well make of it. That poor oul divil—agh!'

'Ye're wasten y'r toime, man.'

'Maybe. Maybe not—that's for me to say.'

'Luk. . . .' He sways over, catching Simon's arm as much for support as for attention, his drink-crafty eyes sizing Simon up. 'I'm drunk—see? I'm dead go-damned dhrunk—see? I've bin dead dhrunk for three whole days—see?' He is holding his breath deep in his lungs and only using the outer edge of it as though he were struggling against something.

'That's a long time. . . .'

'Yeh, it is. I'm from Kildare—FissGerald's Kildare!' Then quietly, fondly: 'Where are ye frum?'

'Ireland.'

'Irelan' ha ha ha ha . . . That's a gud wan! Irelan' he says, ha ha ha ha. . . .' He steadies his eyes to peer into Simon's face. 'Furrfurst Irishman I've seen in many a day!' He lets go all his breath and waits till he has a new chestful. 'Ye—ye don't luk a bad sort. No . . . I loike ye. Aye, I do,' nodding in comfortable agreement to himself. 'Luk.'

He leans heavily on the arm, biting his fingers into the flesh with a suggestion of braggadocio that implies he is also

a strong sort of fellow. Simon gently takes the back of the hand in his right hand, picks it up, crushing the knuckles together so they crack. The drunk accepts who is the stronger and is more ingratiating. 'Luk?' He breathes out and in again, overcoming a dizzy spell.

'Luk . . . I—I soul' tin bullocks. I got plinty a cash, bags af it. . . . It's in t'bank—allus bank it 'fore I sthart. Luk—all I have out'a tin quid. . . .'

Silver shining in the dirty hand. He drops a coin and overbalances looking for it, hands and feet on street, ass in air, fourlegged. Simon straightens him and finds the coin, a half-crown. 'Here.

'No, ye kape it. Gwan, have it . . . git yrsilf a ball.'

'You're running a risk, ye know?'

'Nah . . . ivery year I sell tin bullocks an' ivery year I have a spree. Holiday—understan'? Hollyday. . . .'

'Okay, happy holiday. . . .'

'Okay, buddie, okay. . . . Pheeew!' Blowing spittle down his chin and trying to herd his straying thoughts. 'Luk? What was I sayin'—eh?'

'Okay, I'll leave ye to it.'

'Luk. . . . I git dhrunk for three days . . . see? I allus git dhrunk f'r three days—see? Allus three days. . . .'

'Three days in hell?'

'Yeh . . . three goddamned days. An' thin I cool aff again. That's way it is, see?'

'Ye must like the stuff?'

'Loike it . . . pswharr! Hate it! Niver did loike t'taste afe it.'

'Why hell soak in it, then?'

'Arragh . . . the effects, man! Jus' wance a year, see?'

'How many more days till ye ascend?'

'Finishin' aff the noight, Iyam—broke, now.'

As though suddenly remembering, he gropes in his overcoat pockets and takes out a puckered packet of cigarettes, fumbling vaguely until he extracts two bent fags, offering

one to Simon, gifting it with a childish pride, and stuffing his own deeply between his numb lips.

Simon strikes a light. The man sways, puckering the fag still more, the effort to focus beyond him. The tip takes fire down one side as he sucks and is then doused in a river of slobber. He draws hard, smacking his lips like kisses, then mutters a curse and spits the ruined fag impatiently away.

'Pheeeew! Mad rott'n dhrunk, Iyam. Bwurrrr. . . .'

He shudders in his maimed loneliness, his good lips grey with slime, two small pimples of running froth gathering in the wicks of his mouth.

'Where are ye going now? Bed?'

'Bid . . . ballsh! Bid—ha ha ha ha. Five bob, see? She's five bob aff me.'

'Who has?'

'Tha' oul bitch, she has. Five bob she has aff me, see?'

'How'd it happen?'

'How?' How'd it happen! Womman—I wanna womman, see?'

'Surely to God ye wouldn't be having pore oul Cathlín?' Simon weakens with revulsion, seeing the old woman again on the shouting street and in the pub. It frightens him, turning his mind about, mating an unlawful rabble of scarfed images. . . .

'Noh? Well. . . . I'll tell ye. I'm honest, see? Ye're a dacent chap. I jus' wanna womman—any womman, see?'

'Yeh, you're honest on your own terms, I suppose.'

'I'm a hellufaman, Iyam.'

'Could ye not find something tastier?'

'Wha' diff'rence? She owes me five bob. Fock hur jus' well's anythin' ilse.' He tries to spit to mark his point, but it drools down chin and coat.

'I dunno. . . . In your state of mind I suppose it's all right. Cathlín's free, white an' over twenty.'

'Wha'? Ye go t'hell. That's what I say. I'll damnwell ride tha' oul bitch from here t'Dan O'Connell Statue.'

'Okay, you're the jockey, brother.'

'Wate . . . ye don't understan'. I'm dhrunk, see? I—I need a womman. I've a pure whiskey stan' an me for two days, begod. Luk . . .?'

He opens the topcoat and displays his great ithyphallus slanting up his belly. 'See? Wo' lie down. Gotta have a womman.'

A dark form is slinking up the street. Simon thinks it may be the tough again and feels responsible for this drunk who could well wake up naked in the morning on a sobering kerb. But it is old Cathlín, scattin' back along the wall. The drunk craftily identifies her and starts. Simon now delays him.

'Look . . .? Take it easy, my friend. . . .'

'Wha'smarrer? I tell'y, I'm dhrunk. . . .'

'I know—but just think a little.'

'Doan wanna! Wanna fock. Let goh!'

He bursts himself awkwardly away and staggers over, waving an arm, calling: 'Wate, wate . . . wate a minit.'

This time she waits for him. They talk in low conspiring voices, their heads together and he fumbles for more money. She goes to the wall, lying down in the lee of a crumbled stoop, lifting her skirts and spreading her legs. The drunk follows. A few feet from her, he kneels down and crawls forward on all fours, tugging the coat corners from under his knees, fighting against the delay as though someone were restraining him.

He fumbles with her impatiently, trying to make a union, buck-rabbiting his buttocks and groaning and cursing. It goes on a long time. He is obviously incompetent to gain a release, his rhythm increasing in violence, his breath a moaning in his throat. . . .

Simon does not know what he is thinking and feeling now. His lack of sensation amazes him. He is scared to feel anything, scared to allow a thought to spill on his hot brain. This drunk is not the person he thinks he is. He is Simon.

And yet, in the fairness of pity, the coupling affects Simon little more than an animal mating, beyond sin, beyond lust. And old Cathlín is excused, acting by her need, a bob here and there, answering any man's liquor lust since no man could lust her were he not liquored. Save for the host of acrid images in his own mind, for Simon they might as well not be there.

The tough is sneaking back up the far side. Simon wants to go, to flee, but has no heart to leave the drunk. The tough slows his jaunty walk, peering over, trying to tell what is happening.

'Hurry up there, Peter!' Simon calls loudly.

The tough resumes his lynx-quick walk, thinking there are two of them. The drunk cannot release himself. Cathlín is getting restive, trying to draw herself from under him. 'Wate . . . wate.' He tries to hold her as a dog forks a bitch. She makes a twisting wiry movement and tosses him off onto his side, dodging his leaden hands, scrambling to her feet as he rolls over on his back in a misery of interrupted lust, imploring her brokenly, almost tearfully, an awful longing in his voice as though he were in anguish. She looks down at him a moment and says coldly:

'Ye've had yer money's wort'!' Contemptuously indifferent, turning away, sniffing, shrugging, and then disappearing into the shadows. The drunk is half-weeping in rage and disappointment, muttering, 'The oul bitch, the oul bitch,' lying on his back as though pinned to the sloping pavement, as though staked to the ground, dying there in ritual shame.

All feeling in Simon melts into an unbearable dumb pain of pity, exactly the same kind of pity he had endured for days when a small child was killed by an automobile—no blame, no irritation, anger, nothing—pity's emptiness. It is a vacuum of absolution. He bends down and gets hold of the shoulders, lifting him up. He does not want to rise, muttering: 'Whur'd she go? Whur is she? Wanna fock hur . . . me

money? She tuk me money. . . .’ As if staying on the ground was that much nearer fulfilment.

‘Ye’ve had your money, brother.’

‘Nah. Whur’d she go . . . eh?’

‘Never mind—she has gone. Listen to me. If ye hang around here alone, ye’ll get your head hammered in. Do you understand? Someone will clean ye.’

‘Who—me? Nah. . . . Whur’d she go?’

‘Ye’ll wake up in your morning suit. Have ye any place to go? Any place to sleep?’

‘Me . . .?’ He shuts his eyes and tries to think about it. Simon pulls the coat over his nakedness and does up a button, holding him perpendicular by the lapels.

‘Where—are—you—sleeping—?’ saying slowly, loudly each word.

‘Me. . . . Noh. . . .’

‘Look, chum, I’m getting tired. I’m going to take ye down to Stephen’s Green an’ tuck ye up on a bench under the quiet trees where ye can sleep.’

‘Yeh . . . shleep. . . . Ye come wid me, eh?’

‘Yes, I’ll go with ye. I’ll have to go with ye! I could no more walk away from you, brother, than I could from myself. A few more hours together an’ we’d be one an’ the same person. Come on.’

‘Whur’d she go?’ He hangs back regretfully, peering round.

‘All right—stay here an’ bedamned!’

‘No . . . wate! I’ll go.’

‘Walk straight as ye can, sensibly as ye can, case we run into cops, or we’ll both get a guaranteed bed.’

Plod and trot, the drunk goes; streets and terrifying silence. It is not natural. The citizens are all dead or else waiting there, behind windows.

‘Where am I?’

The quiet Green paying its autumnal toll. Branches hanging over the railings. ‘Here ye are, avic, a quiet bower for ye.’

'Need a womman. . . .' But he is not so convinced now.

'Okay—see how ye feel about it in the morning. Here's a bench.'

He pushes the numb man down onto it, making him lie back and lifting his feet up. 'Ye'll be all right here if ye keep quiet.'

He grunts, breathing through his nose almost with a snore, his eyes open and vacant. Simon folds his hands on his chest. 'R.I.P., my friend.' The eyes and breathing do not change but suddenly the left hand slips off his body and hangs inertly to the ground. He is asleep.

Tittering shadows, several women whispering in the shade as though inside the railings. Simon crosses over the street and stands a little while under the houses. Three girls move out of the shadows and go towards the bier, their heads hooded with 'kerchiefs, hands in coat pockets, elbows stuck out, featherless vultures feasting on the pornographic night. Three fates, they stand and look down on the unconscious man, whispering together. One bends down and speaks to him.

'Wha . . . wha,' he mutters.

They look at each other, the speaking one holding her nose.

'Hoi! Hoi up!' the drunk shouts. He is driving his cattle.

The women laugh, ghosting on.

Simon wanders back to Harcourt Street, weariness now brewing an old deep violence in him that would break senselessly forth upon any man who met him with an arrogant challenge in the night. There is so much to think and to unthink, to remember and to forget, to be understood. *O Christ little brother I have enough, now: no more.* Life as witnessed has moved round the circle close to a purity of negative saintliness that is beyond despair.

O not these humans—I don't judge, little brother, I daren't. Too far near the slide meself. These people are no harm, Lord, save to themselves. It is the learned casuist, the fat or lean one,

the bland one, the one with the velvet skin and flesh of concrete, these are the relentless evil ones. There are nice people in this city. I know that. Clean people in clean beds, religious people rich with prayer. But, Lord, they all keep washing their hands and inspect their knives and forks for bacteria: they have not died as this miasma of old-dead scum, ancient as the night, has died and daily dies. Neither have they lived for to live, a man must die and die. O archetype of man, if man is archetyped and not fathered by two lewd germs in azoic slime forgive me to spit in your fine face this night. . . .

'HELLO.' Chuckle, the cat purr. 'Where are ye goin'?'

Can't go much further!

'Hi, come back.'

He stops, the voice breaking through his automatic thinking. Although he has just witnessed one manifestation of open-air fornication, he asks in genuine surprise:

'What do ye want? It's risky challenging strange men in the night.'

'Come over an' talk to me.'

She stands beside a lighted telephone kiosk, smoking, leaning negligently against the kiosk, one leg across the other.

'How lovely your profile in that soft light. Is that why ye stand there? Or does it inspire and illuminate your customers?'

Intimate chuckle: old fast friends of fifty moments.

'Ye should be in bed, lass.'

Laughter. Nice laughter, not raw or forced. 'What do ye want of me?'

'That all depends, now!'

'Aye, I suppose so, like the worm an' the thrush.' He goes over and leans beside her on the wall, producing a cigarette.

'Put your thing t'moine,' she says, her teeth shining in the smile as she holds out the red unwinking eye to him. Her hand is white, small, delicate, with well-made nails. She has a clean, fresh grass-smell.

'In this flattering light ye are quite beautiful.'

Chuckle. 'We're full of the blarney.'

'Aye, chip af the oul sthane in me pocket. You're a bit late on the job, aren't ye?'

'Och, never too late. I saw ye goin' over the street wit' that drunk feller.'

'Yes, he sure was drunk, sister. . . .'

'Are ye an American?'

'Nope—Irish.'

She looks at her cigarette, tamping the end with an almond-nailed thumb. 'It's late . . .' she mutters after a silence spent in trying to value him.

'Ye just said it wasn't. But tell me, what do ye see in me? Ye are digesting me fair enough. I'm only a male with the necessaries thereunto, which may or may not inspire me to silver your little hand.'

'It's late . . .' she mutters again, dropping the cigarette and ringing her toe on it several times as if she has just heard some call in the night and is forced to go.

'But it's a long time till the mornin'.'

'Ye can have a stan'-up wan for half-a-crown?' she offers, coming back to business.

'Sister, ye would have to pay me a lot more than that.'

'Don't ye want a woman, then?'

'No—truthfully, no.'

'What are ye waitin' for, then?'

'Now, that's unfair. You spoke to me. But I'll move on if ye like. . . .'

'No . . . wait.' She moves nearer.

He can smell her body, her hair. In the blind night her freshness remains. She makes her play, moving a slippery knee against him touching his loins lightly.

'Dead. Dead as the Dail, sister.'

She laughs in her throat with matriarchal laughter, all happiness, misery, goodness and evil written by a rune-curve of her careless tongue. Very confidentially she asks: 'What d'ye say?'

Her green-scarfed head barely reaches his shoulder. She seems very young. Putting his hands gently on her shoulders, he moves her back a bit, saying softly: 'With what I have seen this night and have endured this past day, ye could be great breasted Maeve herself. I'm spent.'

'What's t'matter with ye? Have ye bin wit' a woman?'

'No—if ye except this whore of a city. Haven't buried the ould hatchet for a long time, *a leinb mo croide*.'

She tries to read his face, not coldly objective as Miriam. She wagers her very safety on the judgement of her experience. He cannot help being amazed at her uncaring bravery, at the utter faith in her power to make a strange lion, who might well be a violent maniac, lie down with her lamb. The nakedness of it frightens him. It renews his anxious doubtfulness against all women who may well be quite egoless in love and in lust, receptive as the raw earth's furrow itself to any seed from any alien hand, no man alive able to mark a wandering woman unless he led her to the smithy; each man going through the prodigious ritual of cutting out a woman for himself, putting his warning brand of name or love on her to mark her his personal and protected possession: marriage—little more than a fable unless unwritten laws, affections and loyalties were mutually observed and fulfilled. Most of the so-called good women only apparently more fastidious and selective by virtue of shrewder commercial acumen, the so-called wild ones careless, thriftless. Marriage, extolled by Church and State as a granite institution ordained by God Himself, no more than a social quagmire where to stray off the accustomed tracks is to risk mud.

'It's stupid and crazy—terrifying, lass!'

She looks at him, sliding one thigh past the other, not hearing him, asking: 'What do ye say?'

'I don't know. . . . What's your name?'

'Lena.'

'Lena what?'

'Lena Corn'

'A good name, Lena: Helena. Troy, Artemis—O sing me silvery moon again an' twist me hawthorn for a grecian bride!'

'Ye're a quare wan.'

'I'm frightened, Lena. Frightened of the night, bleak-

faced houses, gaol'd trees, the stars, everything. Every damned thing.'

'Ye're in a bad way!'

'Yeh, so I am. How old are ye?'

'Old enough to know better!'

'In this light ye look no more'n—O fifteen, seventeen? But you're pretty an' very brave. You give me one ounce of your terrible courage an' I'll set fire to oul' Irelan'.'

'Are ye a Republican?'

'Any Irishman worth the name is a Republican, Lena.'

'Ye're not on a job, are ye?'

'No . . . an' yes, I suppose.'

'Is that why ye don't want anythin?'

'No, it's not—no offence to ye, Lena *a rún*.'

'What's in t'can?' Pointing at it with her small foot.

'A sacred symbol of eternal life—but it's dead now. I'll weep tomorrow an' tomorrow.'

'Ye are a quare feller.'

'No—only damned scared.'

'Look,' she seems suddenly busy. 'It's late. I've a room.'

'An' has it a bed, now?'

'Sure it has—a good soft one. . . .'

He laughs. 'A good soft bed under a safe roof, night walled out, refuge an' sleep, Lena. But the money? Last time a girl offered me a bed she wanted ten bucks for it.'

'She must'a been rale warm ha ha ha ha. . . .' She laughs easily, swinging her body about. 'Come on—we can see about t'money.'

'Okay. I'll be the quietest customer a girl ever had.'

'What about t'can?'

'Thanks . . . awful end for Ophion to be deserted in a dry street.'

'Ye've bin drinkin'?'

'Only a few fumes, now, Lena. Last smoke off the ashes.'

'You're like a feller I know. He's a poet in Merrion Square, sort of.'

'I suppose every man is a m'ute poet, Lena. At that tragic moment before the throw. Every man a monarch, then. A god creative. We are kings, an' we unking ourselves.'

'Hush, now! Ye'll be heard. . . .'

'Who wants to eavesdrop us? The stars and the crows—all else is dead or tranced by death's many mirrors.'

The waning moon is making its old ascent, a perfect half-moon with a burned-paper edge as if the fierce sun had at last charred it, casting its light behind towers of steaming cumulus off the hills, the Plough resting its share on a sweat-shone roof, the husbandman of heaven untackling there, leading his centaurs to their stables for the night.

'That is the Plough, Lena . . . see? The little star above it is the Pole Star. The patron star of travellers. . . .'

'I do often look at the stars. . . .'

'It would be nice now, Lena, if we were two people going to our house in a fresh land—only the two of us—with sufficient salt, seed an' steel to start all over again. I get an awful sick feeling in me sometimes that we might have to start like that, all over again. I get impatient an' want to be one of the first to get away—before the rout begins. We might have to be content with stars, sun, rain an' the four seasons, or what'll be left of 'em. I wouldn't shed a tear were I to walk through a city like this an' see no living soul, doors hanging open, cobwebs for curtains, grass bursting up the panels—I've often imagined it. Little heaps of bones here an' there, white skulls, everything quiet, everything dead. . . .'

'Father Comyn was talkin' about the end of the world.'

'Sirius isn't ready yet. We'll still have a lot of life before then.'

She laughs, squeezing his arm.

'But travel light. Too much clobber an' ye can't concentrate on essentials. Yeh . . . *stirb und werde*—valhalla by tomorrow—the two o'clock out of Amiens Street. But sleep now, Lena. That's the thing—deep, swift plunging oceans of sleep right up to the door of death.'

She chuckles. She has heard something similar before and squeezes his arm again. 'Sleep's not everything.'

'No, Lena. No finagling,' he warns. 'I love ye now—were I to board ye, I'd only spoil it all.'

Proud of her gifted powers and skills, she laughs again, but he goes silent, trying to hear a terrible little air ghosting through the back of his mind. He is afraid to hear it, and has to hear it and it comes forward with awful solemnity so he can whistle it: no beginning, no end. He can see it, see the slowly moving notes singing their tones, poised there, shining there on the dark stave of the night. . . . 'Lave me be, O lave me be, noli me tangere. . . .'

A tall dark house, all its horizontals askew as if the earth had grown under it or as if the house had sunk. Lena is pushing through a bleached door with a Palladio fanlight. He follows her into a dim narrow hall the width of the door, on one side a wooden partition. Feeling with his hands on either side, he watches her climb a rickety stair, the oilcloth with a worn hole on each tread which slants outwards making his balance insecure. The air is warm and leaden, carrying an attic odour of lumber and perished birds and mice. No pretty pink ladies here—grey-green and sadly bitter. Narrow landing, one gas jet with a bare fanned flame, the odours now flavoured with the sick-sweetness of gas; ahead another narrow stair, and others, stair by stair, up and up to a last step on the edge of space. . . . But Lena is opening a door beyond which three bundles of clothes that are sleeping people lie along the walls, the one near the lamp an old woman on her back, her mouth falling open; an unwrapped mummy dragged from a robbed tomb.

Lena is beckoning in her open door. . . . Okay. . . . In the gloom across the threshold, she turns: 'Gimmie a few coppers for t'gas?' Her house-voice is liquid, brown, soft.

He fumbles in his pockets and produces three pennies, watching her move to a lamp and light it, although she has put no money in her meter. The gas sighs hoarsely, plops

once or twice, bubbles, purrs, then fills its ivory bowl with increasing hurting light until the room is day-bright.

She is bold-pretty, tough-pretty, slight, with fair almost flaxen hair that has a metallic gleam, a smooth figure . . . But the bed, the lovely sleeping bed: a double, made of iron, with two brass knobs at the head, the end knobs missing; faded blue cotton quilt.

Washstand with its delph, chest of drawers with a mirror, cane-bottomed chair and a bentwood kitchen chair, a mummy-case wardrobe, its walnut veneer sloughing off; the floor is carpeted, a great hole in the middle filled with a bit of carpet of a different green, the edges tacked down; plain curtains drawn over the window. It is a third of a bigger room, ending abruptly at the door-side wall which is a wooden partition. The walls have been papered by an amateur, the joins off perpendicular, the pattern fierce, active, more so for its constant failure to mate, setting the eye an unending problem to decide which cluster of henna and pink roses belongs to which wreath of leaves, the gaslight bleaching the strong colours.

Lena is watching him, still wearing her grey tweed raglan coat, one hand in a pocket and the right one held out laconically. Her big wet eyes are not grey. He is glad. They are blue, light dusty blue. In the tactless gaslight her full face startles him a little. Not a bad face, but masked by cosmetics which the light discolours, making the lips unhealthy purple, the eye-sockets fevered with shadow. 'Ten bob?' she is asking, herself and her bed for ten shillings.

He looks at her, smiling, shaking his head. 'Sweetheart, this room's not worth more'n five—bed, no bumps, no breakfast!'

'Come an. . . .' Her voice is case-hard. 'Ten bob or nothin'.'

'Be aisy, Lena. Ye asked me in. I will offer you a crown for the bed.'

'What d'ye take me for?'

'Well . . . dunno. Better put the name upon yourself.'

'I c'make three quid a night!'

'Daresay.' He looks regretfully at the bed. 'Okay—no harm intended, no harm done.' He moves to the door. 'I won't waste any more of your valuable time.'

'Here—wate. . . .' She takes a step towards him. He stands by the door, shaking his head. 'No, Lena. Get yourself a proper client. I on'y want to sleep.'

'Wate!' she commands again, frowning, looking at him, reassessing him and the circumstances. 'All right!' she announces, relaxing, adding: 'Anyways, it's late. Might as well have five bob as nothin'.' Fully accepting him now, she lifts her arms, yawning. 'I'm tired, me feet's killin' me.'

'God save your poor feet,' he chuckles, going to the bed, putting his two hands on it, springing it. It is clean and sweet notwithstanding whatever it has supported in its time. Frowning again, she comes over, the half-off coat caped back on her shoulders.

'But . . . if ye do anythin'—I get the ten bob?'

'Sure,' he agrees solemnly. 'Cross the thirty-two divided pieces of me Irish heart!'

'Well. . . .' Like a landlady with a new lodger, she fiddles nervously with her two hands, becoming modest, not seeming to know what to do next.

'Do ye mind if I go ahead . . .?'

'What . . . no—oh no.'

He takes off his jacket and absently she pulls off the coat, shedding it reluctantly, still frowning, going to the wardrobe which opens with a yeeaagh full-squeak, and taking out a hanger. She wears a smart grey costume with waisted jacket, the skirt taut across her hips, showing the long line of the thigh when she walks, the hem lying close in the knee-napes. He watches indifferently, wondering what it will be like living with a woman, getting to know every gesture, habit, voice-change: like climbing into another's skin, it would be, swapping skins, looking at life and circum-

stances with four instead of two eyes: another woman not unlike this Lena, parted and fashioned as Lena. This Lena lives so for a fee. Tamar loved feeless: chastity or unchastity about equal; which one has the heavier fault.

No, Simon, stop thinking like a parish pope. The brand of the parish is buried in your bloody mind. Listen, ye pious bastard: to act in the love of the action, even if the motive is rut, is the beginning of freedom. Okay, eat the goddamned hatchet, even if ye have to excrete screws.

Lena, at the wardrobe, is drawing her arms out of the tight jacket sleeves, hanging the garment alongside the coat. The tight skirt has a long disguised zip behind a pleat. She hesitates before she takes it off, dropping it down on her feet: pale-pink cami-knickers under the blouse and skirt, the full backside and upper thighs bulging provocatively in the wide-legged pants as she bends down. Bareskinned, she would only be a nude, but the sleazy synthetic silk adds its quota of glamour. Her back, shoulders and upper arms are firm, white and shapely. Simon smiles. It is the first time he has had the peaceful luxury of looking at a strange young woman with unclouded sight. Wondering vaguely about the amount of money he might be owing her on the morrow, he finishes undressing, hanging his clothes on the threaded spike of the missing knob.

Lena swiftly kicks off her black court shoes, dropping by the height of their heels and seeming younger and more girlish, her posture and carriage relaxing and changing, the bare foot mating naturally with the floor. She pads over to the basin, pouring water into the china washbowl from the matching ewer, starting to wash her arms, face and neck thoroughly. The washstand reminds him of the one in his mother's room, the matching, cane-handled slop pail, the chamber underneath on the floor; camphor, carbolic soap, lavender water.

The water sounds remind him of the eel. He sits on the edge of the bed in his underpants, absently rubbing his shins

with the instep of either foot. Ophion lies in a quiet curled ring, looking so dead. He could have released it in the Liffey long ago. It could have made its way up the river to the muddy reaches and lived there its long growing time until the finished marriage-urge led it through the wide ocean to a decent and fulfilling death. Its wasted death makes him sad.

Lena has wiped herself with a damp flannel, with paradoxical haste and modesty, and has dried herself and cleans her teeth, emptying her slops into a chipped enamel pail. She wraps up her head again in the scarf.

'Don't tell me ye are going to put your hair in curlers?' he asks, grinning.

She turns to him, tying a knot on the top of her head, the bowed pale arms and uplifted breasts beautiful, saying in a wifely way: 'I got a chape perm off a Jewish woman down Henry Street—wid a silver tint, it is. Lasts me about a month—me hair grows quick. My! You're nice an' sun-burned!' She sighs. 'I near roasted meself at Howth this summer.'

'With your skin, ye should bathe in fresh buttermilk,' he suggests.

She looks at him, thinking over his advice as she folds the towel and drapes it over the washstand rail, saying: 'If ye like, ye c'have a wash.' Coming over to the bed, turning down the quilt and drawing a pink cotton nightgown from under a pillow, easing it over her perm, keeping on her cami-knickers either in modesty or discretion. 'What's in the owl can . . .?'

'It was a fish, Lena. A holy fish. Dead now.'

'God save us—an owl snake!' she shudders, gazing into the can.

'No—a fish. An Atlantean fish. Careful! It may child ye with a new nation, dead as it is.'

'What are ye doin' with it?'

'I dunno. . . . It was a sample. But it's dead now. Foul water kills them quicker'n anything else. It's a strong fish

that can live in spoiled water.' He dips in a hand and lifts the eel out, Lena quite uneasy now with man and fish. 'Lovely thing it was,' he mutters. 'Lovely thing still. . . .'

'Gagh . . . !'

The eel lies over his palm. It is not stiff. It is supple still. He watches the spatulate tail curve weakly under his hand. 'It's not dead! It's alive yet!'

'What'll ye do with it?'

'Fresh water! Fetch the jug for me.'

She brings over the ewer and he drops the eel in, watching anxiously, hardly able to see it in the shadow made by his face in the neck of the jug, adjusting jug and head so he can see. Very soon it revives, slowly undulating around the bottom, the delicate pectoral fins playing again. 'Wonderful, Lena!' he smiles at her.

She tips the ewer in his hands and stares into it and then looks up at him. Her drawn clean face is chaste and pretty; fine nose, quiet, brave-stubborn mouth. Impulsively, he leans over and kisses her cheek as he stands up.

'Water, Lena? It will need the full of this.'

'The tap's an the landin'. . . .'

He pours off the water into the bowl and goes for more, tip-toeing past the old sleeper from Egypt, who wakes, opening her eyes, staring uncomprehendingly: inarticulate, vicious, defenceless eyes, habitual to hurt, asking why O why. 'May God save ye, mother,' he whispers to her. Her lids fall again. Sleep your sleep, now. . . .

Lena is sitting on the bed, her knees gathered up under the nightgown. He finds the newspaper parcel that is his toilet gear and gives himself a quick cold-water shave and a wash, his stiff face becoming easy again, then sits on a chair and washes his hot feet, using his own small towel and spreading it over the back of the chair.

With arms folded against the chill, Lena watches him. 'Ye have the big muscles runnin' all over your back!' She comments, surprised. 'Ye're like wan of them boxers.'

'Hard work, Lena. I row ⁱⁿ a boat maybe twenty miles a day.'

'Are ye a sailor, then?'

'Ayé, sort of a Swiss sailor!'

'Where are ye from?'

'Corran where the grass grows.'

'I know a feller from there.'

'Guess you know twenty-six fellers from twenty-six counties.'

'This wan has a hare lip—talks quare.'

'Name of Healy?'

'Aye, think so. I niver believe names. Do ye know him?'

'I know him.' Seeing Healy and men anonymous, in the bed, going through their mating mimes. . . 'Is there a toilet handy?'

'Downstairs, it is. Ye can use t'pot,' she nods sideways to indicate the pot's place.

The idea embarrasses him. He smiles ironically at his fastidiousness against the performance of a simple natural function before a woman upon whose body he may well enact humanity's most intimate physical deed of procreantiveness and sharing, giving and receiving, dying and becoming, even if barrenly.

'Which side of the bed . . .?'

'Don't mind. . . '

She drops her feet to the floor and kneels with elbows on the bed, the green unopened bud of her head on her arms, and says three abbreviated Hail Marys. 'Pray for us sinners now an' at t'hour of our deat' amen, ye can put out the light whin ye're ready. What time do ye want a nudge in t'marnin' ?'

'No hurry. Put me out when ye want to.'

'Han' me me watch—it's an the washstan'. Ye have the beautiful body, now. Wish I had the waist of ye! Bet ye have a lot of sex, as they say?'

'I'm nearly at the end of me sex, Lena, thank God. I haven't snaffled the ole horse. I've ridden it out. A'n now the next race is the same thing all over again—in the mind.'

'I don't know how the priests do at all,' she comments sympathetically.

'Maybe they love God. Maybe they can find their sex in the brothel of the mind. Hard to say. . . .'

She is winding the watch carefully and slips it under a pillow. . . . 'It's there if ye want the time.'

'Don't particularly want any time, *a cuid de'n tsaogal*.'

'Ye have the Gaelic?'

'Not natively.'

'I could niver get used t'it, meself . . . ' shifting over to the wall and pulling the clothes under her chin, yawning.

'Have ye enough room, there?'

'Plenty, thanks.'

'Don't turn the light right out. Jus' low. . . .'

He makes the room cloudy and grey with a suggestion of green, the wallpaper pattern jumping into black and white. Ophion a shadow-ring, going round and round, never to cease looking for freedom; in the wire cage in lake water five hundred eels were moving round and round, their interweaving bodies a perpetual glyph like the soul-glyph on the Celtic crosses. He gropes under the bed for the chamber and tries to make the urine flow silently, feeling for the floor's height and setting down the pot without a thud.

'Think I'll go, too.' She gets out and walks over to the foot of the bed, making her water, chuckling: 'It's like we wus married!' a nostalgic gleam of longing buried in the words.

'Aye,' thinking the same thing.

'Agh . . . ' she complains. 'Allus manage to wet meself, ticht-ticht! Ye'll find a piece of a towel b'the bucket under t'basin—gimmie it?'

'Yis, ma'am.'

'Them posh hotels have a wee face towel b' the toilets,'

she comments as she turns away and dries her thighs, putting the cloth back and going to her place again.

'Are ye okay now?'

'Yes, thanks. Are ye?'

'Soon will be.' He gets into bed and lies back, his body melting luxuriously into the mattress, looking at a faint bird-shaped shadow on the ceiling, pinned there by a street lamp and thinking about the street lamp shining there all night and dying into dawn, all night in a cold, lonely and feral street. He is grateful.

Lena is chuckling: 'Niver bin in bed wit' a man who didn't want to be ridin' me!'

'Leaving out my infancy, it's the first time for me, too.'

'Men are always wantin' to ride the wimmen,' she says darkly.

'Yeh . . . but I don't know to this day whether the wimmen always want to be ridden.'

'Ah, sometimes . . .!' lightly, matter-of-factly.

Silence; the dark bird on the ceiling moves its wings as the curtains breathe.

'Don't ye say any prayers?'

'Sometimes—when I'm heart-scalded with dumb misery. Cry in the night. . . .'

'Ye should pray when ye're happy, too!'

'Happiness may be the finest prayer there is.'

Lena is not relaxed. He asks softly, in an effort to ease her: 'Ye live an' work here?'

'Aye. . . . I rent this room. I papered it meself—this is all me own furniture. I pay two quid a week for it.'

'For the room?'

'Aye.'

'Who's the landlord?'

'I dunno—a feller comes roun' t'collect. They say it all belongs to the Church.'

'What church in the name of God?'

'I dunno. I haven't bin here very long.'

'Could ye not find an easier job?'

'I had a job in a big house an' the master used t'feel me arse every time he got the chance—all for me keep an' a poun' a week.'

'What started ye in this racket?'

'Och, I jus' started. . . .'

'How old are ye now?'

'Nineteen. I worked after I left school, then me mother died an' me sister begun t'have men in t'pubs t'get money for t'house since me father drunk his wages the same day he drew thim. When I was fifteen he tried t'sleep wid me wan night. Me sister told the nuns an' they got me a job in Ballsbridge an' put Phoncey, me young brother, in an orphanage. Then me sister told me how to git men. She broke me wit' a candle.'

Chaste, lustless candle, moth-magic love. . . . Cupid disguised as tallow-chandler. Pity Tamar. . . .

'Where is t'sister now?'

'She's dead, God rest her soul. Consumption, it was. Me mother had it, too. I cried a whole week over Mary. She wus rale good. I paid for nine masses for her. The nuns sayed she wouldn't stay long in Purgatory.'

She talks quietly on, her sleepy mind turning over her thoughts without effort, creatively. . . .

'Then I met a feller who liked me. He paid me five poun' a week. He wus a sort of nob. He had a big room in a house an' used t'snake me in the back way at night. He was nice an' quiet—over forty, he was. I liked him—I got used to him. That's bad—me sister warned me never to git used t'a man. But for a whole year I didn't have t'bother wit' any men forby him. Then he was married an' the wife got a hous' out be Clontarf. I never seen him afther an' I was lonely. . . .'

Silence. The bird above is a bat, hovering, one white eye. . . .

'I worry, sometimes, about the way I live.'

'So does everyone. . . .'

'But the priest says fornication's a bad thing.'

'It's only sexual when sex is idoled, Lena. When we idol anything, any cult, creed or power, we fornicate. An' when we know we're doing it an' keep on we sin against the Ghost, we're self-liars.'

'Mebbie, but I do get worried.'

'I tried to be a whore, once, Lena.'

'But that's bad. It's a terrible sin!'

'What is?'

'Men ridin' men.'

'Yeh—it would be for a normal man, I suppose.'

'I've seen them here.'

'Yeh, I guess one could see everything here, in time. If a man could see long enough, Lena, he could see all of time here—back to the dark an' forgotten gods who still sit in t'hills.'

'I know a feller like ye but he's a terrible heretic.'

The bat's wings are waving as though the wings were still and the body bobbed up and down. A stronger breeze distorts it, changing it into a spider with a bright pale head.

'Are ye a Cathlick?'

'Guess I'm what ye'd call a non-communicant.'

'That's terrible.'

'What is?'

'Bein' excommunicate. I couldn't bear it, God save me.'

'Lena, a church should never have anything to do directly with a person's private life. That's trespass—one of the trespasses we pray for in the Lord's Prayer.'

'Well, never mind,' she condones graciously. 'Ye have been in America?'

'Yes.'

'Wish I could go there.'

'Ye'd have a tough time in the States in your job, Lena.'

'Och, I wouldn't be at this. I know a girl wit' eight quid a week an' her full keep in a big house. I don't like men at all!'

'No?'

'No! Not like that. I hate them mushin' me. Ye have t'be rale fond of a man t'kiss him like ye meant it. Anyway, why should I? They don't pay me for mushin'—they expect that free. They're payin' for to cp me, that's all. The quicker the better. It's quare. But I jus' can't stan' them when they're rale drunk—that's awful. Ah' I jus' can't stan' black men. Wan tried to pick me up the other week. Did ye ever go with a black woman?'

'Yes. . . . She was beautiful, Lena. Her smooth skin seemed to be dusted with black pollen. Seemed if ye could look through it like a dark stream an' see the red strong blood flowing.'

'Ye liked her, then?'

'Yeh—she began to get used to me, Lena. As ye say, that's bad—a bad thing. . . .'

'Himph! America must be a quare place.'

Silence: she has talked herself past sleep, now.

'Ye wouldn't like a go?' matter-of-factly.

'No. Thanks. . . .' He turns over and grinds his face into the pillow. Dammit, she didn't have to. . . .

'Are ye asleep?'

'No,' he mutters, turning on his back again, his eyes squeezed shut to keep his mind from seeing nagging ghosts.

Silence again, the old bones of the house creaking, rapid footsteps on the pavement below, a raucous argument of cats—their humpbacked concert grotesquely human, ending in a flurry of sibilant curses. Lena is amusing herself making small plopping noises with her lips like a dripping tap. She asks suddenly, her voice an electric shock:

'Ye must read a lot af books?'

'No, not any more.'

'I read sometimes but I don't care much for them chape novels. Suppose I know too much. Me mother used t'tell us good stories when we wus small. She come from Kerry an' could speak the Gaelic. She allus used t'make us laugh. There's wan story I never forget. It's not a rale one at all . . .

about an owl widda who was a miser an' she had an owl horse. . . .'

'That is a good one, Lena. I know it myself.'

'I fised t'cry for the pore owl horse. . . . Have ye any stories?'

'Aye, many a one.'

'Tell me wan, then? I can't get off—me skin's all itchy an' tired.'

'I'll tell ye the one about the Lake of Inchquin. Long ago this lake used to be a rich plain with a big castle on it an' under the castle there was a deep cave that led somewhere near Tir na Óg. There was a fine running spring in the cave's mouth. The lord of the castle was told by a wise woman that three beautiful maidens used t'come out of the cave at certain times in the moonlight. He set himself an' waited an' one night he grabbed at the last lady as she went past him. She begged for her freedom, but noticed that the lord was handsome an' young, an' so she consented to live with him an' be his true wife an' he was very happy. She had two children to him an' her only condition was, since she was not a mortal woman, that no stranger should ever be invited into her house. He was so happy with her, he never wanted to break her word. He had bred himself a fine racing horse an' felt like trying at the fairs an' he got his wife's leave to go. He went to the races an' won all before him, coming home with money and prizes. Then he asked to go again and she let him and he came back loaded with more money and prizes. Then he asked for the third time an' that time he forgot with the weight of success upon him an' with the drink an' boasted about his peerless wife an' he invited all the racing men to come home with him an' admire her. His wife was watching from her tower an' just after dark she hears drunken singing and shouting. She throws some clothes on her babies an' goes to meet the riot. They all witness a perfect woman coming to meet them, a perfect child in each hand. But the lord knew what was wrong an' leaped off his racing horse

with a great shout of sorrow! But he was too late an' he watched his wife an' family disappear down the cave's mouth past the running spring. As his drunken companions stood watching an' wondering, the spring welled forth in a great river of water. It kept rushing an' flowing until the wide plain started to fill and fill until it came to the level it is in this very day.'

'That is a nice story, now!'

'Aye, an' on a wild October day, if ye stand on the shore an' listen, ye can hear far, far off the poor lord crying still in his endless grief.'

'It is very sad.'

'There is a great mystery in that story, Lena, an' the end of it could be sad for everyone.'

'Ye are clever!'

'No . . . no . . . Lena.'

'But ye know a lot af things,' she says sleepily.

'No, something dead in me. Something has slowly died in us all, could be a song we should be singing.'

'What are ye talking about?' sleepily.

'I suppose it's a sort of remorse. I have it all the time—some owl hereditary hangover that always keeps me at being less than a full man. A sort of dead thinking that annoys and offends the Good People . . . cold abstract death-thinking, nail-driving, corpse-thinking, it is. The world is a cold place an' Ireland shivers in a shroud. It's terrible, Lena. The whole world full of power, wealth dumped in piles like manure where it's not needed an' further fields dying infertile—but no kindness at all. Men only men by the size of the clout they can be giving.'

Her breathing says she is asleep: sleep, then, pale female, take no thought for the tomorrows, he whispers to her. Don't worry about dawns, days and long nights of unfulfilment. Pawn no name, mortgage no dream, trespass on no sacred field.

The breeze in the curtains destroys the ugly sprawl of the

spider on the ceiling and makes a bird again, a wide-winged, curve-winged bird with a white beak, a white head like Master Malster Yeo's gull's head; a soft black gull with a white head. . . .

He smiles at it. Sleep, now, little frail boat, drift lightly from this tenement terror-shore . . . wharf in ebb-tide mud.

The awful scrap of a tune comes back upon him, holding him there on the rim of sleep till it sings itself. Then he goes after it to where it plays endlessly. . . . Sleep: sleeping in a great bed of stone in a high stone house full of twisting corridors: footsteps are pounding on the stone floors and someone calls urgently: 'Wake up! Wake up!'

Voice, heavy breathing at the door, the handle turning. Lena stirs, stretches with a sigh like a mother who has heard a child's cry in her sleeping. . . . 'Wha's that?'

'Someone at your door.'

'Moirā—are ye there?'

'Agh . . . it's Benny John Sharkey,' she complains.

The man's name for her and her name for herself: he feels resentment that she handed him the first name on her tongue. She said she had little use for names.

'What'll I do? Get out, get under the bed?'

'No, he's on'y drunk. He allus comes when he's drunk.'

'Moirā?' the heavy, hopeful, waiting voice of the man beyond the matchbox door. 'Can ye hear me?'

'Moirā?' asks Simon.

'Agh, that's on'y what he calls me. His wife's name, it is.'

'What are ye going to do?' He is glad her name is Lena, after all. He wants to help her.

'Moirā.'

'He'll have that doorknob off.'

'He's not a bad feller . . . on'y drinks terrible. His wife left him.'

'Shall I go?'

'No, stay. He's blin' drunk—never does anythin'. On'y gets me t'jerk him off.'

'My God.'

'Well, he won't ride a woman proper on account of his wife. He's an unfortunate man. He's religious. Allus gives me a quid. Ye stay in t'bed—quiet. He'll never notice. I'll try an' put him off.'

'What about your quid?'

'Agh, he'll be back. Stay here quiet.'

She throws off the bedclothes on her side and walks over to the door, talking to it like a person.

'Benny John?'

'Aye! Moira? Let me in!'

'Come back tomorra.'

'No. . . . Let me in.'

'I'll have t',' she whispers over to the bed, making a comical moue. 'He'll stir the whole house if I don't.'

'Okay.' Simon nods and whispers, snuggling down in the bed as she turns up the gas.

Nun-chaste in the nightgown, gentle-seeming, she unlocks the door, the simple action so innocent and ordinary that she could be opening that door for a child or a close girl-friend or for a stranger selling gadgets. She opens it a few inches, leaning forward with a dainty ballet-mime on the balls of her two feet to last-check the visitor, then admitting him. Simon feels a distant twinge of jealousy that flares into deeper jealousy. It is against all human grain to be in bed with a woman and then have her admit a vagrant. He feels his toes curl in shame for his deep residual intolerance.

'Moira.' The man is fumbling at her, but she draws her body back into the loose nightgown and he only catches handfuls of cloth. He is fat and paunchy, middle-aged, red-faced, wearing a decent dark-green suit, half the buttons on vest and trousers undone. . . . 'Moira.'

She steers him over to the cane chair and pushes him into it, competent as a nurse, telling him to be quiet or he will wake the house. He is misery-drunk and weeps wanderingly, without any feeling, as though he had started to weep some-

time earlier and has forgotten about it. 'Moira.' He looks at her shiftily, distrustfully. 'What are ye like that for? What are ye like that for. . . . Oh, whoo hoo hoo . . . ' he wails in his hands.

'Husha, now!' Lena chides, kneeling before him.

He stops, slowly parting his hands and looking through the widening loophole, craftily. . . . 'What am'a sayin'?' he queries, peering down at her. 'Who are ye?' he demands, turning his face a little as though he expected a slap, his voice suddenly shopkeeper sharp.

'Moira, I am. Husha, now. . . . '

'Moira—aye, Moira,' he muses secretively, nodding.

She is undoing the rest of his fly. He jolts his body forward on the seat, spreading his fat thighs so he looks like a little potato-maneen Simon used to make with spent matches and suitably sized tubers.

'Have ye the money?' she asks, glancing up at him.

'Money?' He fumbles in his inside jacket pocket, his eyes going inward, still conscious in the sphere of money; his hand rooting through the dark pocket, his fingers separating the notes, his lips pursed. 'I've on'y ten bob,' he mutters, not looking at her but expectant for a hopeful reply.

'A' poun', Benny John, ye allus give me a poun'.'

'Haven't a poun', he mutters woodenly.

'Well,' she sits back on her heels, a torso on a big toadstool, now reluctant.

He watches her, trying to gather his tangled mind unto this single simple issue, moving in an odd hampered way in his mind like a man walking barefoot along a thorny path. At heart he is a miser, a torturer, money his thumb-screw. He has probably driven away his wife because she grew weary begging money out of him. His thin lips are like two pieces of electric cable, his hand resting in the pocket, his hidden fingers holding the separated notes.

Simon begins to see into this man's life: he is arrogant, authoritative, perfectionist, irascible: he feeds his small

power on a tartar'd diet of continual niggling and teasing. He is mad, very sick, but not dangerous—not mad enough to be impudent, too clever to jeopardize himself by dangerous action; the sort of man who would not kill direct but would provoke death by cumulative and unrelenting annoyance and irritation; who would set traps and listen to the squealing quarry, not making a move to end its pain.

But Lena is a professional trouper—no fee, no entertainment. She is not involved by heart, desire, fear, or by any convention. Her whoredom is also her freedom, a cold, barren, acrid freedom.

Probably the only way his wife could hurt him was by leaving him, not considering his hurt, only her own sanity. He had never thought she would dare to leave.

Lena makes a move to get to her feet. 'Wate . . . don't go, Moira. Don't lave me.' He begins to jump his shoulders with sobs, the rest of his body rippling round inside his clothes as though he were laughing.

O Christ little brother all this is on the surface. What deep a-human contempt festers in him? It is like wading through a morass of fetid treacle to go there into his soul's dark room where all his unfaced doubts hang, jibbering, in chains. Drink has stripped three skins off him. His cool conniving contradicts itself.

'Wate,' he mutters flatly. His small fat hands reach out, curled in the first noose man ever made. Lena does not know: he could choke her, save his pound and perhaps enjoy release. She is not afraid, not concerned, she only wants his pound as fee or as gift, and he would as soon kill her as part with his pound. She leans back from the hands. His left one closes in a fist, the right one going back to the money pocket, fingering again the flimsy single note, drawing it forth, a faint smear of a smile—a look what I have for ye—on his face which says he was only kidding. He is nervous in case he reveals more than one note, drawing it forth with little tugs to free it from its brethren until it makes a dry leaf in

his hand, holding it in finger and thumb like a titbit for a begging dog.

Lena does not see this, nor know it is all part of his peculiar idea of the sexual act. She reaches forward and takes the pound, scrounging it up in her hand, leaning forward on her knees again, picking up the dank penis, the pound prisoned by two fingers against her palm, her green hooded bird's head pecking forward, her mouth shaping itself.

Almost immediately, he groans his brief pain and pushes her roughly, disgustedly away, acutely conscious of his exposure. Lena does not resent his attitude, she has done her work, she allows him a drunk's benefit, not knowing that the drunkenness is a generic condition in the existence of his total aberration.

'Bleddy bitch,' he mutters to himself. 'Bitch,' shuddering. There is something else on his drugged mind. He turns his head slowly and looks round the room, seeing nothing or else seeing something not seeable. His hands and forearms rest on the chair arms and slowly, he leans forward, tensioning his arms and, like an old man, shoving himself on to his feet, slowly straightening his body and standing erect.

Lena takes an arm but he brushes it away with fierce impatience, looking round the room again. 'Moira, lust is a mortal sin.'

'Yis, Benny John, but it's late.'

'Quiet,' he snaps, offended at her. 'May t'saints forgive me me grievous fau't.' He crosses himself, sniffing, shuddering, and moves as one tranced to the washstand, lifting the ewer up with both hands and drinking. The water splashes out over his chest but he never remarks it. Lena goes beside him, reaching out her hands to the ewer in case he drops it. . . .

Gagh . . . he shudders, letting the ewer go. Ophion has swum under his nose. Lena catches the ewer but most of the water spills, the eel falling on to the carpet, scything smartly about.

Benny John's face is cadaverous with horror. He moves slowly backwards, half crouching. Simon jumps out of bed to save his fish, kneeling down in his brown near-nudity, scooping it into the cup of his hands, sliding it back into the jug which Lena holds by the handle as she stares, slightly puzzled.

Benny John is staring at Simon, whispering: 'Who're ye?' 'Tom the Divil . . . ! Agh-ha!' Simon puts his hands to his temples like staghorns and dances a few steps. 'Gaaa-rrrrr . . . I've come for ye! Come an me oul potato—hell nixt stop!'

'Na-ah,' he cowers away, throwing up a forearm.

'Come on! Ye've had your fun!' Simon grabs an arm and drags him towards the door.

'Moira! God forgive me, I didn't mane . . . ' then he stops talking with a gasp, closing his teeth.

Simon grasps his upper arms and swings him round, staring into his dark, troubled face. . . . 'Where's Moira?' he whispers, an awful thought in him. 'What did ye do to Moira?'

The glazed eyes try to see, the consciousness struggling through its fog—guilt, fear and tremendous craftiness. Simon feels sick and full of bleak fear—fearful to pry any further. He pushes him through the door on to the landing.

'No, no . . . confess. Want t'confess . . . priest. . . .'

Simon carries him swiftly down the stairs, setting him on his feet in the street. Chimney-pots crooked and stove black are cutting into the first green iris of the dawn, a great Bethlehem-star poised, held motionless, in the shallows of the ending night.

'Go now!'

'Where . . . where'll I go? What'll I do?' He catches Simon's arm, not wanting to be left alone.

'Go to the nearest chapel an' pray on your knees for twenty-four hours an' light a gross of candles.'

'Where . . . ' whispering. 'Where . . . ?'

'I'll be waitin' for ye if ye come out too soon.'

'Where's it . . . ?'

'Brother, if ye can't find a church in this anointed town, ye must be in a poor way. . . . Christ little brother, pray like the hammers of hell for us all.'

Lena has soaked up some of the water. It makes a dark cloud on the old carpet. She is nervous it will rain on someone below. She gets into bed again and tries to settle herself with a Holy Mary. He refills the ewer for Ophion. The old woman is sound asleep, face to the wall, the cracked soles of her two grime-grey feet sticking out under a grey blanket, toes all twisted together on each foot.

'Pore Benny John. . . .' Lena mutters as he gets in long-side her, his chilled skin starting immediately to glow and sweat.

'Well, if ye say so. . . .' He is still seeing the dawn's ruthless fanlight, the grotesque chimneys branded crazily into it.

'There's no harm in him.'

'Where'd the wife go?'

'I dunno—jus' left. He thinks she's in Englan'.'

'Hope so. . . . Hear no evil, see none, speak none. Lena, ye are a sort of a saint. Wish I had your power not to pry an' to judge.'

He leans over and kisses her gently, her breath charged with the odour of fresh hazel-bark. Then he turns, sliding his arms under his pillow and lifting the ends of it over his head, rigid with a surge of depression, squeezing his eyes shut and grinding his teeth together until they hurt, holding his breath until the terror passes.

A fat old man sits on the end of the bed, on the end-rail, his breasts and belly great as a wailing woman, waving delicately a gaily-coloured kerchief in a hand. His two eyes are turned into the corners each side of his nose as if he were trying to see what he was saying. Through his nose he mumbles unintelligibly . . . Buff buff buff buff . . . like Healy.

'Stop!' Simon shouts, scared but enraged. 'You're the ole bastard who's been following me all day.'

'Wha's matter . . .?' Lena asks, stirring.

'Sorry, dream. . . .' He has kicked the bedclothes off the both of them. She fumbles after them and he helps, muttering to himself. Their four feet bare at the bottom, the clothes heaped round their shoulders, he curls up beside her and weeps like a child.

'There, there. . . .' she mutters sleepily with a small yawn.